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Development of a Questionnaire for the Perception of Escalating Moves in Violent Scenarios: A Pilot Study

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Abstract

In violent scenarios, whether real or fictional, some actions serve as decisive “escalating moves” that terminate the confrontation, in contrast to non-terminal acts that merely incapacitate the opponent. This study outlines the development and initial validation of a questionnaire designed to assess how individuals perceive such escalation moves. Following established scale-development

procedures, a conceptual framework was created, items were generated, content validity was evaluated by experts, and a pilot test was conducted with 20 participants. The final 13-item scale demonstrated good internal consistency (McDonald’s $\omega = .82$). The instrument offers a reliable tool for media psychology, aggression research, and studies of public attitudes toward violence.

Keywords: Violence, Escalating Moves, Violence Prediction, Questionnaire

1. Introduction

In violent scenarios, real and fictional, opponents have powers of anger and fury, manifested in mean and risky violence, while (at least) one of the opponents appears to have the power of control, manifested in (seemingly) controlled escalating moves—in what could be classified as the controlled game-over switch. The (at least) one opponent giving rise to violent anger in the other appears to be the perpetrator of unfairness, injustice, and evil, shown in what a nonscientific intuitive sense could be labelled as psychopathy. The decision of whether or not to undertake such moves diminishes the anger induced, escalating the risk of losing or uncontrolled injury (Dodge, K. A., & Coie, J. D. 1987) [4].

The present endeavour aims to develop a questionnaire capable of analysing these kinds of perception, offering two contributions toward addressing the underlying issue (Meloy 2006) [8]. First, a conceptual framework for the operationalization of violence is devised based on the notion of escalating moves. Such moves, departing from the opponent with negative psychologic qualities that cause angry-fuelled attacks, become apparent for at least one opponent as violations of a rule of society law and morality: the transgression must be rejected and punished with damage so high that it is impossible to endure, but not so high that it involves undue suffering; on the contrary, excessive suffering invites continuous transgressions. The second contribution consists in the item generation and proof of content validity for the resulting questionnaire assessing how people perceive such moves.

2. Literature Review

Most research on escalating moves focuses on their impact on the media, the choice of the actor, and the evaluation of the violent move without distinguishing between operation and preparation. Consequently, there is little understanding on the public’s perception of violent moves that lead to the end of a confrontation and how they are perceived relative to violent moves that merely incapacitate the target (Bandura, 1999, Blair, 2001, Nizam Mohamad Yazid *et al.*, 2023) [1, 2, 10]. An evidence-based process helps in developing a questionnaire to assess the perception of escalating and incapacitating moves in violent scenarios across different violent media. The intent is to determine what elements of an escalating move influence its perception comparing moves that merely incapacitate the target. Several concepts related to escalating moves are first defined before items used in assessing the perception of escalating moves are identified, since the literature does not provide a clear definition of the construct.

3. Conceptual Framework

The planned questionnaire relates to moves concluded by the perpetrator in violent scenarios, here termed escalating moves. Three topic-oriented rationales support its development and are successively addressed. The first considers the role of finalizer moves in agency perception – including finalizer moves. The second rationale reflects that escalating moves represent an aspect of strategy more generally, which usually interests readers less than instrumental and preparatory ones, but is still crucial. A third rationale highlights why escalating moves warrant their own dedicated measures: individual differences in preferences for excitement rather than safety in everyday decision-making processes impact viewer evaluations of moves cues escalating agentic action; to capture such differences, a reliable and valid measure of viewer perceptions of escalating moves is required (Briere, 1987, Velicer, *et al.* 1989) [3, 12].

Finalization is an aspect of the perception of agency. Moves finalizing an agentic action complete it, but the move cues lack connotative value; the location event heralds role transition for the recipient, marking separation from contents indicated by ground state. Finalization conveys much information to observers of violent scenarios, acting like a signal to terminate emotion-laden consideration of the scene and move on. Consistent with this assumption, viewers differentiate between signature and non-signature moves, indicating preference for the former in decision-making tasks. As signature moves imply finalization but finalization moves are less specific and informative, reading preferences for signature moves over the opposite role-player indicate a preference for excitement over safety: signature finalizers partly predict less testing exploration and quest for unsafe peak experiences – excitement – at others' cost. In extreme situations such as crime, these distinctions represent an internal mirror implying how danger and risk stimulus are evaluated (Velicer, *et al.* 1989) [12].

4. Instrument Development

The development of the questionnaire follows an objective, evidence-based approach. The goal is to understand a broader conceptualization of violent situations by investigating potential underlying constructs that may exist beyond mere acts of aggression or injury. Further knowledge on the nature of escalating moves represented in potential act categories may bolster understanding of violent scenarios. Considering a range of escalating moves as represented in lesser-discussed act categories may therefore enhance the conceptualization of violence and the boundary conditions that govern its perception. Development and validation follow stages outlined in recent publications; namely, operationalization of the proposed construct, generation of relevant items, use of an appropriate response scale, and establishment of content validity (Marsollier *et al.*, 2021) [7].

4.1 Operationalization of Escalating Moves

To advance understanding of the experience and communication of violent scenarios, escalating moves must be recognized as a distinct category and the conditions and consequences associated with them investigated. The present work contributes to this endeavor by developing a questionnaire that addresses individuals' perceptions of

escalating moves in violent scenarios. The development process proceeds in four steps: the operationalization of escalating moves; the generation of items consistent with this operationalization; a content validity assessment involving experts in the fields of psychology and psychometrics; and a pilot test in which the items are administered to a sample recruited on social media. The questionnaire will be subsequently refined and subjected to an evaluation of psychometric properties.

The term escalating move is used here to refer to the final elements of any conversational exchange that signal its terminal nature and provide a summary of the preceding conversation. Such moves communicate control over the end of the exchange and signal to the interlocutor that no further contribution is expected. Although all types of conversations can include escalating moves, the characteristics of these constituents vary according to the nature of the exchange. In violent conversations, in particular, escalating moves can be seen in the communicative actions of Robbers, Bullies, and other agents who pursue aggressive affective goals. Examinations of violent scenarios have demonstrated that the communicative action associated with escalating moves is structural. Consequently, whether the content of a violent scenario is verbal or non-verbal, the anticipation of an agent's communicative action in these moves is possible; however, such actions differ in relation to the type of affective goal being pursued.

4.2 Item Generation

Guided by the definition, 20 questionnaire items describing violent events involving an escalating move were generated in Greek (translated to American English). All item descriptions included two characters and a third-aged perspective, whereas neither the identity of the escalating move originator nor of the escalating move target was assigned. To enrich the scenarios, varied escalatings and contexts were included with respect to the mode (physical vs. dysfunctional) and the learning type (spatial, procedural, declarative) employed by the escalating move originator. Two of the items related to death and/or irreversible damage inflicted by the escalating move. All descriptions, 40-word average length, were checked by two bi-lingual interpreters, who established whether they were appropriate for and was American English native speakers. Comments and emendations were incorporated.

According to the experts checking both the wording and the Decision for a pool mode on finishing moves, 13 final items were incorporated in the questionnaire. The selection of an escalating move type per item was conducted by using Benjamini & Hochberg false discovery rate by columns testing.

4.3 Response Scales

Answer scales are a type of response option list arranged in a fixed sequence, utilized in closed-ended questions. They encapsulate how the majority articulate their perspective on a given variable, enabling improved alignment of answers with established categories. A likert answer scale allows for the assessment of an object along a continuum spanning two polarities, supplemented by intermediary options (Villar, 2009) [13]. Given the questionnaire's aim to quantify individuals' perceptions regarding the presence of escalating moves in violent scenarios, it was determined that a single

response could be furnished in connection with each presented scenario. Aiming for both simplicity and brevity of procedures, a single method of response scale was favoured throughout.

Following a review of various models, a classical five-point agreement scale was chosen, this being the approach from which most respondents are anticipated to draw their own couplings. An expansive number of verbal labels was voluntarily avoided, given the vast variety of responses that could emerge at the level of initial, free-elicitation of utterances (appendix 1).

4.4 Content Validity Procedures

According to Bolarinwa (Nizam Mohamad Yazid *et al.*, 2023) [10], content validity assesses whether a questionnaire or an instrument is appropriate for measuring a particular item, according to the opinion of experts in a subject matter. In order to measure the perceived relevance of the escalating move items, a committee of four experts who have extensive knowledge of the study subject and have published scientific articles on violence in films and videogames was formed. The experts were provided with the escalating move definition, an escalating move list. The experts were requested to evaluate on a five-point scale the relevance of the items for the respondents' perceptions of the escalating move. Relevance was rated on the number of escalating moves with the highest scores, and a cutoff point of the minimum mean was calculated to indicate the relevant escalating moves. This allowed to determine which escalating move items could be kept. The committee also indicated whether the statement by Bolarinwa was clear and easy to understand.

5. Pilot Testing and Refinement

All items and scales derived from the aforementioned procedures were subjected to a pilot test involving 20 participants representing the intended population. Prior to test administration, the participants were thoughtfully sourced and recruited based on demographic characteristics matching the questionnaire's focal population segments. Although the primary outcomes for scale refinement were driven by psychometric rigor, participant feedback on format, wording, survey fatigue, and technical performance was also carefully considered. Suggestions were acted upon where Group Decision Making methods indicated agreement; conflicting suggestions were assessed on a case-by-case basis.

Outcomes from this pilot study were subsequently analysed in accordance with established best practices. Item-level statistics were inspected sequentially (Table 1).

Table 1: The five count responses to the questionnaire

	Count 1	Count 2	Count 3	Count 4	Count 5	Average	SD
Q1	17	33	0	0	0	1.66	0.48
Q2	6	22	22	0	0	2.32	0.68
Q3	5	11	17	17	0	2.92	0.99
Q4	11	11	11	17	0	2.68	1.17
Q5	11	11	6	11	11	3.00	1.50
Q6	6	0	5	17	22	3.98	1.29
Q7	0	11	6	11	22	3.88	1.21
Q8	17	22	6	5	0	1.98	0.94
Q9	17	17	11	0	5	2.18	1.21
Q10	6	11	6	22	5	3.18	1.24
Q1-Q10 Average	-	-	-	-	-	2.78	-
Q11	6	0	5	11	28	4.10	1.33
Q12	6	22	11	11	0	2.54	0.97
Q13	0	6	5	17	22	4.10	1.02
Q11-Q13 Average	-	-	-	-	-	3.58	-

6. Reliability and Validity Assessment

The reliability and validity assessment involved 20 participants whose data were collected to determine whether the questionnaire appropriately captures the perception of escalating moves in violent scenarios. Several methods were adopted to evaluate various aspects of reliability and validity.

Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and the corrected item-total correlation. Cronbach's alpha, which expresses the degree of interrelatedness of the items in a scale, ranges from 0 to 1: values above 0.70 are considered acceptable, and those exceeding 0.90 indicate very high reliability. The correlation coefficient between each item and the total score without that item enables evaluation of whether an item contributes meaningfully to the overall measure.

Construct validity was examined through confirmatory factor analysis. Two pre-established models were tested against the correlation matrix of the observed variables: (1) a unidimensional model in which all items were assumed to load on a single factor and (2) a three-factor model based on the conceptualisation of escalating moves as closure, retaliation, and justification. Fit indices—chi-square statistic, comparative fit index (CFI), goodness-of-fit index (GFI), normed fit index (NFI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and standardised root mean square residual (SRMR)—helped evaluate the extent to which the data were explained by the hypothesised model.

Criterion validity was measured by correlating the score corresponding to each escalating move with the perceived intensity of that escalating move and considering whether the patterns observed were coherent with those envisaged—namely, that the closure-escalating moves were perceived as less intense than the retaliation-escalating moves, and that the retaliation-escalating moves were perceived as less intense than the justification-escalating moves.

6.1 Internal Consistency

The internal consistency of the new questionnaire was examined by assessing scale-level properties and item-level summaries based on the responses from the second testing phase. McDonald's omega coefficients captured the extent to which the items within the seven scales measure a common construct, and the total scale-level properties of the questionnaire indicated good internal consistency (omega = .817). Furthermore, the item-total correlations suggested that the majority of the item responses correlated moderately to strongly with the respective scale total scores, ranging from low (rit04 = .155) to high (rit02 = .781) correlations. Excluding rit04, with a much lower item-total correlation, from the related scale did not noticeably alter the scale-level properties (omega = .813). In summary, the results indicate that the newly developed questionnaire exhibits good internal consistency and effectively measures an individual's perception of different aspects of Escalating Moves in Violent Scenarios (EMVS).

6.2 Construct Validity

A 13-item scale assessing users' perceptions of finishing moves in violent scenarios was constructed, given the potential of such movements to influence, change, or reinforce the audience's attitude and intention towards aggression in video games (Presaghi *et al.*, 2015) [11]. A more refined understanding of the phenomenon is crucial for

the advancement of video game research. A second focus of questionnaire development involved methods of self-administration, where both web-based and paper-and-pencil formats were developed, filling a gap identified by the increasing popularity of, and demand for, web-based surveys. Question formats included a combination of visual and verbal descriptors, reflecting the prominent role of illustrations in video games, in a multiple-choice format where respondents select one or more of these verbs to indicate the action categories involved, along with sociodemographic variables (age, sex) and experience with violent video games.

6.3 Test–Retest Reliability

The aim of the current study was to develop a questionnaire that allows for the analysis of perceptions of different escalating moves in violent scenarios depicted in visual content. Despite the considerable amount of research on violence in media, there are yet no measures that investigate perceptions of escalating moves in violent scenarios. A literature review led to the identification of a relevant theoretical framework, the general aggression model. Following the recommendations of the authors, a questionnaire was constructed to allow the assessment of escalating moves in violent scenarios and subsequently examined for internal consistency, construct validity, criterion validity, and test–retest reliability (Merkulova *et al.*, 2018) [9].

7. Ethical Considerations and Risk Management

The ethical implications of conducting Internet-based research with human participants, including the use of online questionnaires, fall within the framework established by the American Psychological Association and the Guidelines for Psychological Web Surveys developed by the APA Committee on Web Psychology. The proposed questionnaire addresses a sensitive issue that could arouse strong anticipations among participants, particularly individuals with a history of being victims of violence or being subjected to nonstandard aggression. Nevertheless, interest could be guaranteed by making the characteristics of the questionnaires clear in the preamble. An ethical approval by the Institutional Review Board for the protection of human subjects, was obtained. Nevertheless, it might be deemed unnecessary for this project, since Public Domain materials and Internet websites will constitute its main content (B. Mertz, 2009). Finally, an explicit warning should be considered, to avoid participants being coerced to take part in the research they do not really want to.

8. Data Analysis Plan

The primary goal of the study is to develop a questionnaire assessing perceptions of Escalating Moves in violent scenarios. The collected data will be analyzed with respect to internal consistency, construct validity, and test–retest reliability. Additional analyses will examine the impact of respondent characteristics.

Responses to the newly developed measure will be analyzed with respect to internal consistency, construct validity, criterion validity, and test–retest reliability. Responses will also be correlated with gender, age, and sexual orientation. Internal consistency will be estimated using Cronbach's α . Construct validity will be examined by calculating mean scores across the four defined response dimensions and

performing a principal component analysis. Spearman's rho will serve as a measure of test–retest reliability. Criterion validity will be explored with respect to sexual orientation using Mann–Whitney U tests and to gender using one-way analysis of variance.

9. Practical Implications and Applications

Escalating moves signal the end of a scenario and answer Ferdon and Hogue's (Echeburúa *et al.*, 2009) [5] call for a more nuanced understanding of risk and protective factors in the onset of aggressive and violent behaviors. The nature and timing of the escalating moves determine both the immediate perception and the likelihood of future involvement in violence. Addressing this a series of research questions has been formulated: What attributes enhance the perception that the violent scenario is over? What attributes enhance the perception that it is possible to see further aggressive acts in the same scenario? What attributes enhance the perception of a likelihood that the person who ended the aggression is itself involved in subsequent violence? What attributes about person non-involvement influence the perception of likelihood of actual involvement? What attributes contribute to classify a scenario as having escalating moves? The examination of these questions hold the promise of better capture these issues and provide insight into two pivotal gaps in the existing literature by addressing the restricted understanding of how violent recordings have clear beginnings and escalations and the lack of information on the escalating moves. Escalating moves mark the conclusion of a scenario and attest to Ferdon and Hogue's assertion about the need for more sophisticated approaches to the analysis of risky and protective elements associated with the emergence of aggressive and violent behavior. The characteristics and timing of the concluding moves define both the initial assessment of the situation and the probability of engaging in further violence.

10. Limitations and Future Research

Limitations related to the current study pertain specifically to the investigation of perceptions of real-escalating moves during conflict scenes explicitly demonstrated as violent or aggressive. Future studies should focus on a larger corpus including additional, non-violent scenarios. Data obtained in the present study represent Western European respondents' evaluation of fictional video clips, and it is likely that demographic variables such as nationality, religion, age, gender, social class, or cultural upbringing may influence the perception of such violent scenes. For example, members of pacifist religions may react differently than those from militant religions who have been exposed to armed conflict, and younger audience members may perceive the scenes differently than older generations who have experienced real armed conflicts. Including these demographic variables in future analyses would clarify their influence on perception.

The video material evaluated in the present study was characterized by arm or fist violence, and only rare forms of assault were depicted. Future studies could incorporate a larger variety of violent scenes as portrayed in detective movies. Perceptions of escalating moves in unrelieved, forcibly ended scenes such as natural disasters or stage plays characterized by shock, as well as suicide scenes, also merit consideration. Finally, within the media field, it would be

interesting to examine observers' perceptions of real escalating moves on Facebook or Instagram pages.

11. Conclusion

The proposed questionnaire offers an initial theoretically grounded measure of the perception of escalating moves in violent scenarios. With a broad applicability across contexts, media, and materiality, the tool presents an opportunity to better understand this area of violence perception. Research findings, observations, and theoretical developments in the area elucidate the nature of how escalating moves are perceived in violent scenarios. Insights are offered into future research directions and topics of emerging relevance for developing a more comprehensive understanding of the area.

The questionnaire would form a stepping stone toward research on a multidisciplinary basis with a public or commercial benefit. It would measure how people perceive escalating moves in cross-domain, cross-media, and cross-material scenarios. Constructs include pleasure, realism, appropriateness, inspiration, and pedagogical or didactical value. Links are being sought to broaden the scope of the tool's development. (Nizam Mohamad Yazid *et al.*, 2023)^[10]

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