

Chapter 83

News Presentation and the Third–Person Effect of Violent Video Games

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ABSTRACT

The present study explored the relationships between the tone in news presentations and the third-person effect. It investigated whether news stories about violent video games changed viewers perspectives based on the positively or negatively portrayed messages presented by the media. Overall, this study examined how news stories encouraged or discouraged viewers from supporting government regulations of violent video game content. An online survey of 388 American adults served as the main source of data collection. The study found that presumed media effects decreased on both others and self when viewers were exposed to positively presented news coverage. Subsequently, their support for regulating violent video games was reduced. However, no changes were found in third-person perception. In addition, those who were exposed to negative news coverage showed no significant changes in their perceived media effects on self, others, and support regulations on video game contents.

INTRODUCTION

The news media often portrays video games as the prime instigators of violence when shootings occur in the schools. Since children and teens are a vulnerable and impressionable group, concerns continue to escalate among parents and policymakers as to the link between violent video game content and youth violence (Anderson, Gentile, & Buckley, 2007; Livingstone, 2007). De Vaan, Boschma, and Frenken (2012) argue that news stories highlighting violence in video games surge as the popularity of gaming among children and teens rises. Moreover, some scholars believe that the government and its policymakers overestimate the effects of game content on others when imposing unnecessary regulations (Calvert, 1998; Schmierbach, Boyle, Xu, & McLeod, 2011).

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The third-person perception lends an intriguing explanation of a public effort to regulate violent video games (Boyle, McLeod, & Rojas, 2008; Scharrer & Leone, 2006). The third-person perception indicates a tendency for people to overestimate the media's influence on "others" or to underestimate the media's influences on "me" (Davison, 1983). These perceptual gaps consequently (but not always) lead to a willingness to support media-content regulations. For over three decades, scholars have offered robust demonstrations of third-person perceptions (Andsager & White, 2007; Paul, Salwen, & Dupagne, 2000; Sun, Pan, & Shen, 2008). Specifically, third-person perceptions and subsequent support for regulation was most salient with anti-social stimuli than pro-social stimuli (Innes & Zeits, 1988; Gunther & Mundy, 1993; Johannson, 2005).

Considering that the news media provides a public standard for judging an issue (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; McCombs, 2004), it is plausible to associate research on the third-person effect with how news outlets present an object with a negative or positive story. Nonetheless, there are few studies to review the association between the third-person perception and the news presentation (Banning, 2001; David, Boyne, & German, 2009; Schweisberger, Billinson, & Chock, 2014). The present study investigated the presentation of news stories and how they influence pre-existing perceptions of harmful media by collecting and analyzing data collected from 388 web-based survey respondents. Thus, the study evaluated the relationship between news presentations about violent video games and third-person perceptions and explored the likelihood that what an individual learns about violent video games from the media links to their support of government regulations on video game content.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Regulation of Violent Video Games and the Third-Person Effects

Violent video games have raised public concerns since the realistic depiction of killing and blood with 16-bit graphics first emerged in the early 1990s (Porter & Starcevic, 2007). After a 1994 congressional hearing and heated discussion over violent video games, several pieces of legislation at both the state and federal level in the United States resulted in the implementation of a voluntary rating system by the video game industry (O'Holleran, 2010). Although more than seven states (including California, Illinois, and Michigan) have passed statutes regulating the sale of violent video games to minors, federal courts struck down the statutes (Kenyota, 2008).

While state interventions attempt to regulate game content in the name of protecting children, scientific evidence lacks support for claims that violent video games contribute to crime. In 2011, the Supreme Court of the United States struck down a California statute prohibiting the sale or rental of violent video games to people younger than 18 years old (*Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association*, 2011). In a 7–2 ruling, Justice Antonin Scalia wrote to afford video games the same Constitutional protection as books, plays, visual art, film, music, and other forms of expression. Unlike U.S. courts, Germany and other European countries have successfully restricted minors' access to violent video games (Robertson, 2008; Saunders, 2013). Researchers studying the third-person effect focus on the presumed media's assumption toward media violence and the consequent unnecessary regulations (Andsager & White, 2007; Calvert, 1998; Conners, 2005). For example, Scharrer and Leone (2006) found that a child's estimation of violent video games had less effect on perception of his or her own aggression than on perception of aggression in others. Specifically, the magnitude of the third-person effect increased when children

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