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Use of military-themed first-person shooter games and militarism: An investigation of two potential facilitating mechanisms

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the link between use of military-themed first-person shooter games and militaristic attitudes. Using cultivation theory as a backdrop, the present work suggested that moral disengagement and hostile attribution bias facilitate a positive relationship between military-themed first-person shooter game use and militaristic attitudes. Results of a path model indicated that moral disengagement did, in fact, serve as an intermediary in the relationship between military-themed first-person shooter game use and participant militarism. However, this study did not show any evidence that use of military-themed first-person games was statistically related to hostile attribution bias or that hostile attribution bias was associated with militaristic attitudes.

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1. Introduction

About 20 percent of all video games sold in the United States are First-Person Shooter (FPS) games (Entertainment Software Association, 2015). FPS games can be defined as games that allow players to experience ranged, firearms-based combat through the eyes of an avatar (Claypool & Claypool, 2007; Schneider, Lang, Shin, & Bradley, 2004). FPS gaming environments tend to be adrenaline-inducing digital spaces that require players to quickly and decisively respond to a hostile world filled with an array of oppositional forces (Hitchens, 2011; Schneider et al., 2004; Weber, Behr, Tamborini, Ritterfeld, & Mathiak, 2009). FPS games centered on military themes are especially popular. For example, the popular *Call of Duty* franchise has sold more than 250 million copies (Lowe, 2016), resulting in over \$10 billion in sales (Time, 2014). According to one estimate, six titles in the *Call of Duty* franchise have individually grossed over \$1 billion sales (Gaudiosi, 2015). Other popular military-themed FPS franchises include *Battlefield*, *Halo*, *Medal of Honor*, and *Rainbow Six*, all of which have sold more than 10 million copies (e.g., Electronic Arts, 2016; IGN, 2010; Microsoft,

2016; Moldrich, 2014).

Given their widespread popularity, FPS games have been a common object of study for scholars interested in better understanding the links between media consumption and social behaviors, particularly as it pertains to violent or anti-social behaviors (e.g., Barlett, Harris, & Baldassarro, 2007; Hartmann, Krakowiak, & Tsay-Vogel; Schmierbach, 2010). However, despite both a general scholarly focus on the effects of video game use and the tendency of popular FPS games to feature military-specific content, scholars have mostly neglected to explore potential links between FPS gameplay and player endorsement of militaristic worldviews. One notable exception is Festl, Scharkow, and Quandt's (2013) study of FPS gamers' attitudes toward the military, in which the researchers assessed the degree to which game use was associated with militarism among German gamers. The results failed to show a direct relationship between video game use and participants' militaristic attitudes.

As a means of further probing the null result observed by Festl, Scharkow, and Quandt (2013), this study advances and empirically tests the proposition that socially oriented cognitive factors facilitate the relationship between use of military-themed FPS games and militaristic attitudes. Using cultivation theory (Gerbner, 1998) as a theoretical backdrop, we specifically propose that frequent use of violent, military-themed FPS games cultivates a sense of moral

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disengagement (Bandura, 1986) and encourage a worldview susceptible to the hostile attributional biases (Crick & Dodge, 1996). In turn, we suggest that these factors facilitate player endorsement of militaristic worldviews. The theoretical rationale underlying these expectations is delineated in greater depth below.

2. Literature review

2.1. Cultivation theory

The general proposition underlying cultivation theory (Gerbner, 1998) is that individuals' worldviews are shaped by the thematic content depicted in the media they consume (Hughes, 1980). Specifically, cultivation theory holds that mediated depictions of reality "reveal how things work, to describe what things are, and to tell us what to do about them" (Gerbner, 1999, p. 9). As such, fictional depictions of society may tangibly shape social relations, behaviors, and/or attitudes. For instance, classic cultivation analyses (e.g., Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorelli, 1980) consistently identified a relationship between television viewing and a distorted perception of crime incidence. Such perceptions of a mean or otherwise threatening world have been subsequently linked to granular social attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors related to issues such as immigration and self-protection (e.g., Nabi & Sullivan, 2001; Seate & Mastro, 2015).

Originally (and perhaps most commonly) applied to television viewing (see Morgan & Shanahan, 1997 for meta-analysis), cultivation theory has also been used to understand the effects of video game exposure (Festl et al., 2013; Van Mierlo & Van den Bulck, 2004; Williams, 2006). As pointed out by Williams (2006), the structural and interactive attributes of video games often vary from those found in television programming. However, video games, like television, generally employ an identifiable metamessage, or an overall logical depiction of how social relations ought to be conducted. In the current context, we suggest that the overarching metamessage presented in military-themed FPS games is one in which serious – sometimes existential – geopolitical issues are most effectively solved using armed confrontation. Such depiction, we argue, comes at the cost of presenting diplomacy as a meaningful tool for large-scale conflict resolution.

While cultivation theory presents a general means of approaching the relationship between military-themed FPS use and militarism, prior research suggests that it may not be an adequate tool for understanding the specific psychological mechanisms inter-relating media exposure and attitudinal outcomes. As such, cultivation theory, applied on its own, may be unable to map out critical relationships between exposure and attitudinal outcomes. To wit, Festl et al. (2013) previously noted that "the cultivation thesis presents global, causal relationships that are abbreviated and, thus, neglects more complex interdependencies" (p. 394). In light of this deficiency, the present manuscript draws upon two theories from social psychology – moral disengagement and hostile attribution bias – to more precisely describe the hypothesized relationship between use of military-themed FPS games and militaristic attitudes. Both of the aforementioned theoretical perspectives are described below. First, however, the construct of militarism is examined.

2.2. Militarism

Militarism broadly refers to perceptions regarding the "nobility and efficacy of the military" (McCleary & Williams, 2009, p. 163). In highly militaristic societies, it is a generally held belief that the armed forces serve as a deterrent to threats and exist as a source of national strength (Eckhardt & Newcombe, 1969). Accordingly,

individuals possessing attitudinal orientations positively predisposed towards militarism tend to support the use of armed forces to address ongoing international issues (Burriss, 2008). As people "cannot be militaristic and peaceful at the same time" (Vail & Motyl, 2010, p. 30), support for diplomacy exists as the "unidimensional divergence of broad-reaching militaristic and peacemaking attitudes" (p. 33). Importantly, peacemaking exists as both a strategic solution to conflicts and as a worldview whereby principles of nonviolence are themselves seen as *noble* and *efficacious* tools for problem resolution.

The degree to which citizens generally reject diplomacy in favor of militarism has reaching social implications. In democratic societies, "leaders that seek to go to war have to build at least some degree of public support for their actions," and especially so "if the war is potentially costly" (Horowitz, 2011, p. 525). Militaristic attitudes are also associated with citizen preferences for increased defense spending (Bartels, 1994), a desire for a state-of-the-art military apparatus (Bacevich, 2013), and individual-level characteristics such as authoritarianism and rigidity (Eckhardt & Newcombe, 1969). The widespread presence of militarism can therefore help encourage global conflict by removing the attitudinal and material barriers that might otherwise inhibit the use of military force by democratic societies. Alternately, citizen support for diplomacy is associated with a commitment to international cooperation, cross-national dialogue, respect for members of other groups, and a desire to collectively address global issues (Pyszczynski, et al., 2102; Vail & Motyl, 2010).

2.3. Moral disengagement

Moral disengagement refers to individual capabilities to conceptualize "reprehensible acts against others in a way that makes them appear worthy, just, necessary, or inconsequential" (Hartmann, Krakowiak, & Tsay-Vogel, 2014, p.3). Moral disengagement results in the shifting of moral boundaries, in some cases resulting in a worldview where reprehensible conduct is rationalized as morally acceptable (Gabbadini, Andrighetto, & Volpato, 2012). Moral disengagement helps explain how "people can engage in behavior conflicting with their moral beliefs and principles without experiencing self-reproach (Page & Pina, 2015, p. 77).

Moral disengagement is a form of moral reasoning (Gini, Pozzoli, & Hymel, 2014) and, thus, is linked to the social experiences that constitute one's lived experience (Bandura, 1986). Bandura (1986,2002) identified eight mechanisms that comprise the higher-order construct of moral disengagement. These mechanisms are grouped into four loci: behavioral, agency, outcome, and recipient. Mechanisms in the behavioral locus include *moral justification*, or the generation of pseudo-logical rationales whereby morally abhorrent behavior is constructed as serving a moral purpose; *euphemistic labeling*, or the use of sanitized language to mask atrocities; and *advantageous comparison*, or the comparison of an abhorrent behavior to a behavior that is even more reprehensible in nature. Mechanisms in the agency locus include *displacement of responsibility* (the abdication of personal responsibility for morally objectionable behavior) and *diffusion of responsibility* (using the division of labor to minimize one's role in the perpetuation of pernicious behavior). Bandura's construction of the outcome locus is primarily compromised by *distortion of consequences*, or the minimization of the harm caused by one's action(s). Finally, the recipient locus refers to mental constructions of the victims of morally execrable behaviors and includes *attribution of blame* (holding victims accountable for their own victimization) and *dehumanization* (stripping people of human properties as a means of deactivating normal feelings of empathy).

There is reason to believe that regular use of violent media may

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