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Cyber sexy: Electronic game play and perceptions of attractiveness among college-aged men

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ABSTRACT

The current study was conducted to determine if electronic gaming among males is related to body image, formation of body ideals, and appraisals of female attractiveness. A sample of 219 college-aged men (age 18–32) completed a variety of measures that assessed their game play habits, their perceptions of their own attractiveness, and perceptions of women's attractiveness. Results indicated that participants' ratings of women's attractiveness varied across the genres of game most frequently played but was not related to age of commencement or frequency of electronic game play. Additionally, frequency of play and age of commencement of game play were not related to self-perceptions of physical attractiveness, the association of positive attributes with muscularity, or the drive to become more muscular. Men's appearance satisfaction and valuation of muscularity was related to the extent to which they compare their own appearance to that of the characters featured in their electronic games. The results indicate that, unlike other forms of media, electronic gaming may have a weaker relationship to decreased appearance satisfaction or the formation of unrealistic standards of attractiveness.

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Introduction

The effect of media exposure on psychological and cognitive functioning has been a popular avenue of research for the past few decades as studies have found that Americans, especially young Americans, are increasingly voracious consumers of media. A 2004 estimate of media consumption by the Kaiser Family Foundation suggests that the typical American youth between 8 and 18 years of age spends 6 h and 47 min per day with electronic media, and 43 min per day with print media (Rideout, Roberts, & Foehr, 2005). Television remains the primary source of media exposure, with the average child watching 3 h and 51 min per day. Video game play and non-school related computer access occupies just under 2 h of a typical child's day.

The same report reveals that access to electronic media in the home is on the rise: 83% of young people between ages 8 and 18 have a video game console at home, and many of those children have a video game player (49%) or computer (31%) in their own bedroom. There appears to be a sex difference in usage, with more boys having a video game console (63% vs. 33%) or computer (35% vs. 26%) in their rooms than girls. Males' electronic game play appears to persist and increase with age, with 65% of male college students reporting regular or occasional play and estimates ranging as high as 15 h of weekly play among college-aged males by a study as part of the Pew Internet and American Life Project (2003).

With these statistics in mind, it is hard to deny the integration of electronic media into the everyday life of American youth. The implications of increased media exposure are far-reaching and influence a variety of behavioral and cognitive domains. In particular, concerns about the effects of increasing exposure to media violence has lead to the current emphasis on exploring the impact of

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media on many aspects of human behavior. Donnerstein, Slaby, and Eron (1994) found that media with a high content of violence leads to an increase in aggression, desensitization, fear, and desire for more media depicting violence. Numerous studies have indicated that media violence is a significant contributory factor in provocations of violence among young people and that repeated or even brief exposure to violence in television shows or in movies may lead to significant increases in aggressive behavior (Anderson et al., 2003; Bushman & Huesmann, 2001). Similar results are suggested for exposure to violence in video games (Anderson et al., 2003). In their meta-analytic review of the influence of violence in video games, Anderson and Bushman (2001) found that exposure was related to heightened physical aggression, temporary decreases in prosocial behavior, increased aggressive thoughts, increased aggressive affect, and increased physiological arousal across 4262 participants. These findings indicate the importance of understanding the mechanisms involved in electronic game play and the influence of these mechanisms on other aspects of human behavior.

In addition to findings regarding violence and aggression, the impact of mass media on body image and appearance satisfaction has been thoroughly investigated using various methodologies, samples, and theoretical justifications. According to the sociocultural theory of body image dissatisfaction, continuous exposure to images of idealized bodies may lead to the internalization and adoption of unhealthy standards of attractiveness (e.g., Stice, Schupak-Neuberg, Shaw, & Stein, 1994; Thompson & Stice, 2001). Research supporting this theory suggests that exposure to unrealistic body ideals through the media and internalization of these ideals and values negatively influences individuals' appraisals of their own bodies. The implications of this theory are far reaching and are thought to affect men (Agliata & Tantleff-Dunn, 2004), women (Thompson & Stice, 2001), children (Dittmar, Halliwell, & Ive, 2006), and adolescents (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002).

Beyond the internalization suggested by the sociocultural theory, the "contrast effect" is another theorized mechanism relevant to the exploration of media's impact on human cognition and body image dissatisfaction. The "contrast effect" refers to the phenomenon wherein standards of attractiveness for non-idealized forms (e.g., pictures of real women) are impacted by exposure to certain idealized images (e.g., pictures of supermodels; Kenrick & Gutierres, 1980). Although the contrast effect has been shown to exist with certain types of mass media (television and magazines; Kenrick & Gutierres, 1980; Kenrick, Gutierres, & Goldberg, 1989), it has not yet been examined in the context of electronic games, although depictions of idealized human forms are common in this form of media.

Video games featuring female characters often depict the female body in an unrealistic and almost pornographic manner. In her content analysis of 33 Nintendo and Sega games, Dietz (1998) reported that 28% of the female characters were portrayed as sex objects with large breasts and thin waists. She proposed that female electronic game characters with exaggerated proportions are created to cater to the mostly male population of electronic game players, thus incorporating the unrealistic and idealized standards of attractiveness, which include a highly exaggerated Waist/Hip Ratio, large breasts, and a low Body Mass Index (BMI = kg/m^2). In a more recent content analysis examining 597 characters from 47 randomly selected games, Beasley and Collins Standley (2002) found that 41% of all female characters possessed large breasts and were wearing clothes that emphasized their sexuality.

Most content analyses have focused mainly on the depiction of female game characters (Beasley & Collins Standley, 2002; Dietz, 1998), however, research indicates that electronic games actually contain more male characters than female characters (Ivory, 2006) and that women are not the only characters in electronic games that are portrayed with unrealistic physiques. Scharrer (2004) concluded that male game characters are routinely depicted with exaggerated muscularity, presenting an ideal body that may be impossible to attain. A recent study conducted by Harrison and Bond (2007) that investigated the impact of exposure to video gaming magazines on elementary school aged boys, indicated that viewing the hyper masculine, unrealistically muscular game characters predicted an increased drive for muscularity among white boys one year later. This longitudinal study suggests the importance of considering the influences of electronic gaming materials when examining media influences on male body image.

Beyond electronic gaming, Agliata and Tantleff-Dunn (2004) found that exposure to ideal male images in the media increased levels of depression and muscle dissatisfaction among college-aged men. In fact, a national survey conducted in 1996 found that 43% of males experience body dissatisfaction (Cash, 1997). Research suggests that both a preference for a muscular male physique and early body dissatisfaction develops in children as early as age six; about the same time that electronic game play begins to increase (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001; Spitzer, Henderson, & Zivian, 1999). Given that research has indicated that social comparison to highly idealized and virtually unattainable models negatively affects self-esteem, it is important to investigate whether continued exposure to exaggerated body ideals in electronic media detrimentally affects a player's body image. Social Comparison Theory postulates that people judge themselves largely in comparison to others, thus exposure to exaggerated body ideals in electronic media may detrimentally affect a player's body image when the model used for comparison is highly idealized and practically unattainable (Festinger, 1954).

Past research examining media influences on body image has indicated that relationships are not always linear. For example, the results of a study by Tiggemann and Pickering (1996) suggested that the sheer frequency of television watching was not correlated with body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness, but the amount of time spent watching certain types of programs (or genres) negatively predicted those body image variables among adolescent women. In another study, Tiggemann (2005) indicated that drive for muscularity among boys was

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