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AMERICAN JOURNAL OF MEDIA PSYCHOLOGY

Volume 4, Numbers 1-4

2011

ARTICLES

- 5 Mihye Seo and Thomas E. Nelson
 Personal Values Modify the Effects of Issue Frames
- 24 Jennifer Ruh Linder and Kelsey Ann Lyle
 *A Content Analysis of Indirect, Verbal, and Physical Aggression in
 Television Programs Popular among School-Aged Girls*
- 43 Monica K. Miller and Alicia Summers
 A Content Analysis of Male Video Game Characters Over 20 Years
- 63 David L. Painter, Juliana Fernandes and Maridith A. Dunton
 *The Effects of Interest Group Advertising and Partisan Stereotyping on
 Candidate Races: Is Same-Sex Marriage the Defining Civil Rights Issue of
 the New Millennium?*
- 80 David J. Park and Maria Elena Villar
 *"I want to be like people on TV": Effect of Perceived Realism, Character
 Admiration and Frequency of Sitcom and Reality TV Viewing among
 African-American Students*
- 101 Qingjiang (Q. J.) Yao and Zhaoxi Liu
 *Message Desirability, Social Distance, and Real Influence: Testing the
 Third-Person Perception in a Gubernatorial Election*

PERSONAL VALUES MODIFY THE EFFECTS OF ISSUE FRAMES

MIHYE SEO AND THOMAS E. NELSON

We examine how an individual's responsiveness to issue frames depends on his or her own political values. Participants read a story about a free speech controversy, framed in alternative ways. They also provided pretest measures of their values. We found that, in the absence of complementary personal values, issue framing had little effect on participants' opinions. This finding is important in terms of testing the oft-stated assumption that framing is an interactive process between communicator and audience. We also discuss the implications of these data for psychological process models of framing effects.

Keywords: framing, issue frame, personal values, applicability

Among the many severe tests presented by the September 11th attacks was for the United States to remain true to its Constitutional essence while repairing the damage and protecting itself from this newly terrifying threat. While the vast majority of Americans, and indeed most people around the globe, expressed righteous anger at the attacks, a few dissident voices blamed the U.S. for inviting such terror to its own shores through its foreign policies. The furious reaction to such dissent in some cases went beyond respectful disagreement, raising troubling questions about the vitality of free speech in a war-like atmosphere (Nissimov, 2001). Many suggested that unfettered speech presented such an appalling challenge to both national pride and security that it ought to be suppressed. Post-September 11th America, in other words, tries to negotiate a new version of the recurrent competition between the values of free speech and national allegiance. When political circumstances

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demand that we choose between equally attractive but competing values, the “framing” of that choice can guide our ultimate decision (Nelson & Willey, 2001). The present study examines how the framing of critical speech after the September 11th attacks influences individual tolerance of such speech. We pay particular attention to how general support for free speech values makes one especially responsive to a civil libertarian frame for this issue.

Framing theory argues that the interpretation or portrayal of a controversial issue can be just as decisive as the raw facts of the matter in shaping public opinion (Entman, 1993). Our opinions about an armed insurgent group, for example, might be strongly affected by whether they are depicted as “freedom fighters” or “terrorists.” Most researchers agree that frames influence opinions by operating on existing knowledge structures, rather than by supplying new information. In other words, frames activate existing “considerations” — objective beliefs, social values, and so forth — and regulate how powerfully they influence opinion on some issue (Zaller, 1992). Nelson and Kinder (1996), for example, showed that alternative frames influenced the degree to which attitudes toward blacks affected support for affirmative action. In their experiments, frames did not make individuals more or less anti-black; they instead affected how much impact these attitudes had on support for affirmative action. Thus, framing is implicitly portrayed as an interactive process between the message and the recipient’s storehouse of beliefs, feelings, and values (Brewer, 2001; Gross, 2000).

The present study directly addresses this presumed interaction between message and receiver for the issue of free speech in the post-September 11th world. More specifically, we investigated whether the correspondence between an issue frame and an individual’s personal values enhances the frame’s impact on opinions.

ISSUE FRAMES AND INDIVIDUAL FRAMES

There are many investigations of framing, and many models of framing effects (see Druckman, 2001a). Frames have been variously described as: news media templates for covering issues (Iyengar, 1991; Price & Tewksbury, 1997); symbolic constructions of issues that partisans use to influence public opinion (Gamson, 1992; Snow & Benford, 1992); depictions of decision alternatives as “gains” or “losses” vis-à-vis some reference point (Kahneman & Tversky, 1984); and personal cognitive maps of issues that individuals use to “make sense” of politics (Berinsky & Kinder, 2000). Across these diverse treatments there is coarse consensus that frames are both rhetorical devices of text and cognitive structures of people (Nelson & Kinder, 1996; Scheufele, 2000). As symbolic rhetoric, a frame labels, defines, or categorizes a political controversy. It also presents a “frame of reference” by which that issue will be evaluated, including suggestions for how to balance competing ideas and claims (Gamson & Meyer, 1996). Individual frames have been described as “mentally

stored clusters of ideas that guide individuals' processing of information" (Entman, 1993, p.53). They include objective beliefs about the facts pertaining to the matter, as well as criteria for evaluating policies, both of which may be shaped by framing (Nelson, 2004).

The dual conception of frames as both communicative and cognitive structures suggests that framing effects can be understood as an interaction between a communication frame and complementary audience values and beliefs (Scheufele, 2000). Aspects of the individual's preexisting outlook that match the frame could facilitate the establishment of a resonant individual frame. For example, when the communication frame stresses the superior importance of one value over its rivals, prior support for that value by the recipient might strengthen the frame's impact on his or her attitude. Such a hypothesis rings true from a social movement perspective. Leaders who wish to enlist the sympathy and support of onlookers do well to frame their issues in the language of common values and principles (Snow & Benford, 1992). As Chong (2000, p. 151) puts it, "Coordination on a frame of reference is readily achieved when opinion leaders are able to synchronize their messages with people's dispositions to receive those messages." Other researchers have concentrated on different elements of such "dispositions," such as partisanship (Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2001) and racial attitudes (Gross, 2000) or expertise (Druckman, 2004).

The interdependence of public frames and private outlooks echoes other communication research that stresses how audiences actively negotiate the meaning and implications of messages from public opinion leaders, rather than passively accepting their conclusions (see Neumann, Just & Crigler, 1992; Pan & Kosicki, 1993, 2001; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Rhee, 1997). Recipients actively filter incoming messages based on their values, knowledge, interest and experience. Indeed, several recent studies have showed how framing effects are limited under certain conditions, or for certain groups. Druckman (2001b), for example, showed how framing effects diminish when the source is seen as not credible. Druckman (2004) also found that exposure to counter-framing and heterogeneous discussion could limit framing effects. More recently, Shen and Edwards (2005) found that when issue frames and pre-existing personal values resonate, people generated more value-relevant thoughts on the issue than value-irrelevant thoughts. Classic research in social psychology (e.g., McGuire 1964) and contemporary framing research (Druckman & Nelson, 2003) both show how contrary prior beliefs limit the extent to which a receiver will uncritically accept a message's conclusions. The current research examines the moderating influence of political *values* on framing effects.

VALUES AND FRAMING

Values are positive evaluations of general conditions or states (such as freedom), or ways of behaving (such as assertiveness). Most values are not objectionable to most people,

but individuals differ in the amount of personal weight or priority they place on such values as guideposts for their personal behavior and political outlook. The standard personological view holds that individuals maintain a “system” incorporating a general-purpose preference ordering or priority ranking among many values (Rokeach, 1973). There can be no doubt that values, so conceived, are important sources of political views, as they reliably predict opinions on a wide range of issues (Feldman, 1988).

Even if a person generally places high priority on a value, however, there is no guarantee that he or she will give it precedence in every case where it conflicts with other treasured values; indeed, it is not always certain that the individual will even see the value as *relevant* to the issue. The literature in political science is replete with examples of values that are endorsed as general principles by nearly everyone but then abandoned in specific cases when they conflict with other values (Sullivan, Piereson, & Marcus, 1982). Whether or not a person honors the value for a particular issue may depend on receiving a frame that activates this value and convincingly applies it to the issue in question. Frames might also help citizens make up their minds when issues force a confrontation between treasured values, leading to attitudinal ambivalence (Alvarez & Brehm, 1995; Feldman & Zaller, 1992). Frames that appeal to social values are therefore especially important in political communication (Chong, 2000; Nelson, 2004; Shah, Domke & Wackman, 2001), and offer a promising venue to examine how such communications interact with personal predispositions to produce attitudinal outcomes.

PSYCHOLOGICAL MODELS OF FRAMING EFFECTS

In testing the assumption that personal values determine the ultimate impact of a communication frame, we hope to shed further light on the psychological mechanisms underlying framing effects. Our approach draws from two psychological process theories of framing effects: Price and Tewksbury’s applicability model (1997), and Nelson et al.’s importance model (1997, 1999). Price and Tewksbury (1997) argue that “knowledge activation” mediates a set of communication phenomena, including framing. According to this model, frames alter the *applicability* of knowledge stored in long-term memory to the issue. In other words, frames affect the perceived overlap or match between the attended features of a stimulus and knowledge stored about a construct (Higgins, 1996; Hardin & Rothman, 1997). Knowledge is activated, and thus has a strong likelihood of influencing opinions, if it is both accessible in memory and applicable to the issue at hand (Higgins 1996). Price and Tewksbury distinguished such processes from *priming*, in which stored knowledge is made temporarily more accessible in memory.

Price and Tewksbury’s model was developed to explain *news framing* effects. News organizations use generic story templates such as “conflict” and “personalization” to

organize coverage of all manner of topics, from election campaigns to budget battles. Nelson and colleagues (1996, 1997, 1999), by contrast, concentrate on *issue frames*, or frames tied directly to specific political controversies (e.g. “abortion is murder”). The distinction between news frames and issue frames is admittedly fuzzy, since issue frames regularly appear in news coverage, and some may even be created by journalists. Usually, however, they are created and promoted by politicians, spokespeople, interest group leaders, and other political elites who have an interest in shaping public opinion (Gamson & Lasch, 1983). While news frames such as “conflict” could apply to nearly any issue, issue frames such as “free speech” and “national unity” apply to a much narrower range of controversies.

Nelson and colleagues argue that framing affects opinion by altering the perceived *importance* and *relevance* of issue-related considerations. Nelson and Oxley (1999) examined how frames for social welfare influenced the perceived importance and relevance of objective beliefs about the helpful and harmful consequences of welfare reform. More recent work (Nelson, 2004) has examined how frames influence the relative importance of competing values. This approach stresses that people do not form opinions simply from whatever cognitions and emotions happen to be accessible (or even applicable) at the time the attitude is expressed, but rather must weigh each consideration according to its perceived importance to the issue. One might recognize that speech restrictions infringe on civil liberties, for instance, but also perceive such harms as less important than upholding national unity. Nelson and Oxley (1999) did not argue that perceptions of importance are determined solely by issue frames, but may also derive from stable predispositions such as political values and ideology.

The priming or activation of a concept does not guarantee it will influence an opinion or judgment (Higgins 1996; Schwartz & Clore, 1983). Even if several considerations are activated, it is probable they will vary in their applicability to the issue. If an issue frame overlaps with the recipient’s personal values, these values could become strongly applicable to the issue, and therefore very likely to cross the threshold of active thought. Highly applicable values could also carry extra weight for the ultimate opinion that is expressed, especially when these values conflict with other active thoughts. Finally, the frame itself might explicitly or implicitly instruct the recipient to assign high priority to a particular value *for the issue*. This might be especially effective if the individual prizes the value in general.

SUMMARY AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

Frames, by defining, labeling, or categorizing an issue, help to set its conceptual boundaries. Such issue characterizations will resonate with many recipients, but will be especially well-received and effective for those holding compatible personal values. These values should be highly applicable to the issue, and will likely enter the individual’s active

thoughts about the matter. But other considerations will also enter active thought, including some that conflict with these values. How will the individual choose among these competing ideas? The high level of applicability contributed by the strong overlap between personal values and issue frames should pay off with a subjective perception that one value is more relevant and important than others. Furthermore, the frame itself might overtly instruct the recipient to elevate one value above its rivals (Nelson, 2004).

The present study focuses on how issue frames and personal values individually and jointly contribute to issue opinion. Research participants completed a pretest measure of how strongly they endorse free speech values. Several days later, participants read one of two randomly selected mock newspaper articles about dissenting opinions following the September 11th attacks. One article framed the issue as a free speech matter, while the other framed it as a question of national unity. Participants expressed their own opinions about the regulation of speech and completed a number of other measures, including their beliefs about the good and bad consequences of unfettered speech, and how important they thought free speech considerations were to this issue.

Our project has been guided by three research goals. First and most basic, we need to demonstrate framing effects on opinion. Our first hypothesis is that the framing of the story should make a difference in people's opinions about the propriety of public dissent:

H1: *Individuals receiving a story with a free speech issue frame will express greater opposition to the regulation and suppression of critical speech than those receiving a national unity frame.*

Second, we wish to see if individuals whose personal values resonate with the issue frames will be more influenced by the communication. We argue that applicability effects depend on the correspondence between personal and issue frames. Thus, framing effects should amplify when issue and personal values correspond.

H2: *Personal values and issue frames will interact, such that issue framing effects will be stronger for participants whose personal values correspond to the frame.*

Third, we predict that framing effects will be mediated by the active, real-time processes of importance judgments. Nelson and colleagues (e.g. Nelson & Oxley, 1999) argue that framing effects are mediated by the perceived importance of frame-related considerations, while Higgins (1996) and Chen et al. (1999) suggest that highly applicable concepts will be seen as more relevant to the decision problem. We expect that framing should only affect importance judgments among the high applicability (strong free speech values) sample. We believe that the effect of issue frames on importance judgments should account for the interactive effect of personal values and issue frame on opinions.

H3: *Issue frames affect opinions indirectly through the perceived importance of free speech considerations. This mediated effect will be stronger when personal values and issue frames correspond.*

METHOD

The hypotheses were tested with a laboratory experiment conducted during two weeks in November 2001, about two months after the September 11th attacks.

Participants

Participants were 138 undergraduate students enrolled in introductory communication courses. Approximately 25% were sophomores, 47% were juniors and 28% were seniors. A little over half (59%) of the students were women. Approximately four out of five participants were “Caucasian,” seven percent were Asian or Pacific Islanders, seven percent were African American, and the remainder were Hispanic or labeled themselves “other.”

Design and Procedure

The experiment followed a randomized, between-subjects design. The main manipulation is issue frame (free speech versus patriotic loyalty). Personal values (strong versus mild endorsement of free speech rights) served as a blocking variable. Participants were so categorized on the basis of a pretest values measure. Therefore the experiment employed 2-by-2 factorial design.

At pre-test, participants completed a short questionnaire assessing their personal values. After the pre-test, participants were asked to sign up for one of twenty time slots at least four days after the pre-test day. Upon their arrival at the experiment proper, participants were randomly assigned to one of the two framing conditions¹.

Participants began the experiment by reading one of two different bogus news stories. Each news story presented the same set of facts about the controversy over managing dissident opinion in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, but framed the issue as either a

¹Our preliminary analysis checked the success of random assignment. There were no statistically significant differences in political ideology ($t [136] = .095, p = .925$), political interest ($t [136] = .471, p = .638$) and stimulus interest ($t [136] = .758, p = .450$) between individuals assigned to each condition. A further χ^2 analysis revealed that the two experimental groups did not significantly differ on any of demographic variables (Gender $\chi^2 = 1.14, p = .304$; Race, $\chi^2 = 4.16, p = .384$; Income, $\chi^2 = 2.17, p = .988$). In other words, random assignment succeeded in producing two very comparable groups.

challenge to civil liberties, or a challenge to national unity. After reading the story, participants answered a questionnaire assessing their opinion about the issue, relevant objective beliefs, and the importance of free speech considerations.

Experimental Stimuli

Issue frames were presented in the form of news articles based on a *New York Times* ² report about the punishment of allegedly “anti-American” statements following the September 11th terrorist attacks. The evaluation of these cases can be seen as a priority judgment problem between two conflicting values — freedom of speech and national unity. That is, these events represent situations when national benefit and individual rights conflict.

Basic, objective information about the controversy was held constant across the two stories, while additional features — the headline and quotes within the body of the article — established each story’s frame.³ The “free speech” frame emphasized that even during a national crisis, an individual’s right to free speech should be respected, while the “national unity” frame stressed that, even though free speech is valuable, this is not a time for tolerance of dissident opinion but a time for unity in order to handle a national crisis. The full text of each story appears in Appendix A.

Measures

Pretest personal values measure. Strength of endorsement of the value of free speech was measured as an average of five Likert-type items ($M = 3.91$, $SD = .68$, $\alpha = .70$) tapping free speech rights and civil liberties (Kuklinski et al., 1991). Participants were categorized into two groups based on a median split: high freedom of speech value, and low freedom of speech values.

Attitude, belief, and importance measures. Attitudes toward the issue provided in the stimulus were measured by asking if participants support or oppose the punishment and regulation of dissenters ($M = 4.62$, $SD = 1.49$). Participants were also asked about their beliefs concerning the expected results of restricting or regulating free speech ($M = 5.04$, $SD = 1.54$), for example, “do you believe regulation for dissent opinion can build stability of

²Carter, B., & Barringer, F. (2001, September 28). A nation challenged: Speech and expression, in patriotic time, dissent is muted. *The New York Times*, Section A, p 1.

³Framing effects should be differentiated from the result of simple learning process. If each issue frame possesses different information or different amount of information, we cannot sure different attitudes are induced by framing effects (weighing process among conflicting values or information) instead of learning.

America under national crisis like these days?" Then, participants judged the importance of free speech ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 1.53$) and national unity values ($M = 4.91$, $SD = 1.36$) as they pertained to this issue, using direct ratings (Nelson & Oxley, 1999). For example, participants were asked, "How important is it, in your opinion, for government to do as much as possible to create opportunities for extreme minority opinion to speak out even under national crisis?" All attitude, belief, and importance items used a seven-point scale.

Control variables. Three demographic variables (race, gender, and income) and other variables related to political issues (political ideology, party identification, and political interest) were also measured. We also measured participants' interest in the article itself (see Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Control variables were used for checking the success of random assignment and served as covariates in the analysis.

RESULTS

Tests of Theoretical Hypotheses

Both *H1* and *H2* were tested using analysis of covariance (ANCOVA), and the results are presented in Table 1. *H1* predicts framing effects on people's attitudes. More specifically, *H1* predicted that individuals receiving an issue with a free speech-oriented textual frame would be more likely to oppose the regulation of speech that is critical of the United States. Table 1 showed that this expectation was supported ($F(1, 129) = 4.86$, partial $\eta^2 = .036$, $p < .05$). Table 1 also reveals that designating participants as "high" vs. "low" in free speech personal values strongly predicted issue attitudes ($F[1, 129] = 6.09$, partial $\eta^2 = .028$, $p < .05$). Participants who had valued free speech more expressed opinions far more supportive of dissidents' right to speak.

H2, our main hypothesis, predicted those who originally have higher freedom of speech-oriented personal values are more likely than others to be influenced by the freedom of speech-oriented issue frame. The result of the hypothesis test (one-tailed test) was statistically significant ($F[1, 129] = 2.71$, $p = .028$). The effect size of interaction (partial $\eta^2 = .028$) was not trivial (see Keppell, 1991).

The means of all conditions are presented in Figure 1, showing a marginally significant ordinal interaction. While framing affected opinions for all participants, the effect is highly significant ($t = 2.57$, $p = .01$) for those with strong free speech values, and trivial ($t = .55$, $p = .58$) for those with weak free speech values. In other words, the magnitude of the framing effect on issue opinion was five times greater under the high applicability (i.e., high free

Table 1

Issue Frame Effects on Issue Attitudes

Source	SS	F	Effect Size
Intercept	61.59	35.36***	.22
Covariate			
Political Ideology	8.67	4.98*	.04
Party Identification	1.85	1.06	.01
Political Interest	1.570	.90	.01
Stimuli Interest	9.13	5.24*	.04
Independent Variable			
Issue Frame	8.47	4.86*	.04
Free Speech Value	10.62	6.09*	.05
Issue Frame × Free Speech Value	6.46	3.71 [#]	.03
Error	224.72		
Total	3234.00		

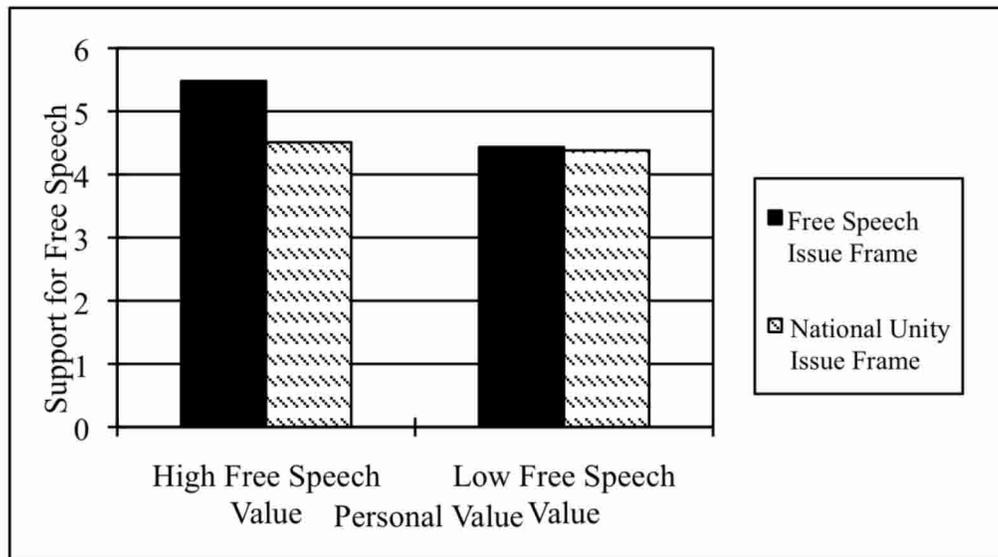
Note. [#] $p < .06$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

speech value) condition than low applicability condition (i.e., low free speech value). This result implies that the mean difference between the two framing conditions was mainly produced by the high applicability group.

H3 predicted that the effect of frames on issue opinion would be mediated by the perceived importance of free speech considerations, and that this mediation would also vary depending on participants' values. Baron and Kenny (1986) noted that a mediation test must satisfy three criteria: first, a significant relation between independent variable (IV) and mediator (Me); second, a significant relation between IV and dependent variable (DV) without the presence of Me; and third, a significant relation between Me and DV (Baron & Kenny, 1986, p.1177). Mediation was tested using path analysis, and the results are presented in Figure 2. The analysis also includes, as predictors of issue opinion, the importance of public order considerations and objective beliefs about the good and bad consequences of unrestricted free speech and the protection of public order.

The upper panel of Figure 2 shows the result of the path analysis for high free speech value holders. The result demonstrates that issue framing condition independently affected the importance attributed to protecting minority points of view ($\beta = .362$, $p < .01$). That is,

Figure 1

Interaction Between Free Speech Values and Issue Frame

participants exposed to free speech issue frame perceived free speech considerations as more important than participants exposed to national unity frame. The perceived importance of free speech considerations in turn affected issue opinion ($\beta = .272, p < .05$). All five predictors explained 45% of dependent variable variance, with every predictor also showing the expected direction of effect.⁴ A separate regression showed a significant effect of framing condition on issue opinion without the mediator ($\beta = .327, p < .05$).

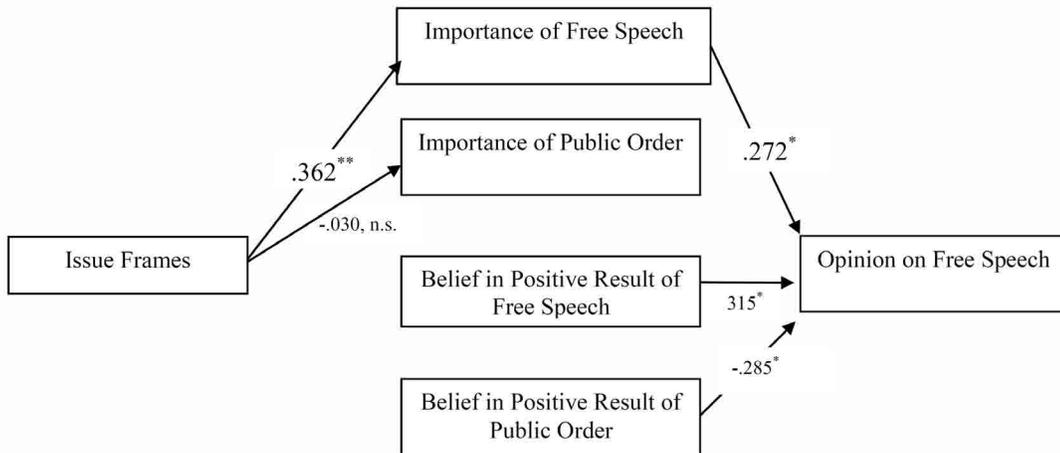
The analysis supports the prediction that that issue framing affects opinions via the mediation of the perceived importance judgments of free speech considerations. In addition, Figure 2 reveals that belief content — judgments about the good and bad consequences of free speech and protection of public order — also influenced issue opinions, but do not explain the effects of issue frames. These results lend further support to Nelson and his

⁴To assure the potential multicollinearity problem between belief content and belief importance, VIF and Tolerance were calculated. All the individual scores of VIF and Tolerance were above the risky zone. Average VIF was 1.44, and average Tolerance was 0.70. Thus, multicollinearity may not be a serious problem in this model.

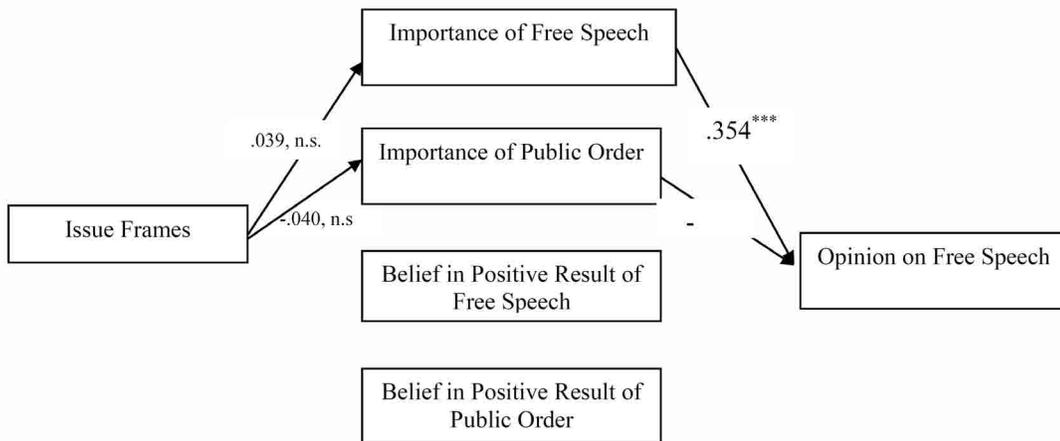
Figure 2

Path Analyses for Perceived Importance Mediation Tests

High Applicability Group (i.e., High Free Speech Group)



Low Applicability Group (i.e., Low Free Speech Group)



colleagues' model.

The lower panel of Figure 2 is the result of the same analysis for the low free speech group. Issue frame did not affect the any of intervening variables in this group, including importance of free speech ($\beta = .039, n.s.$). The only significant relations appeared between

the two value importance judgments and issue opinion. The more important free speech considerations were, the more opposition was expressed to regulating free speech ($\beta = .354$, $p < .001$). At the same time, greater importance attributed to public order considerations predicted greater support for the restriction of minority opinion ($\beta = -.245$, $p < .05$). All five predictors explained 26% of dependent variable variance.

Combining results of two path models, we can conclude that Nelson's importance mediation model works only among the people who have higher free speech values from the beginning. When those with higher free speech value were exposed to the free speech issue frame, they attributed greater importance to free speech considerations than others with strong free speech values who were exposed to the national unity frame. On the other hand, among people who hold relatively lower free speech values, issue framing made no difference in the importance they attributed to free speech considerations. That is, even though they were exposed to free speech issue framing, they did not attribute greater importance to free speech values with respect to the issue of restrictions on dissident opinion. This result further emphasizes the role of concept applicability in regulating the psychological response to issue frames.

DISCUSSION

Framing theorists have labored to develop empirically tractable models of how frames help citizens to make sense of their political surroundings. Our study investigates individual responses to frames, centering on the interplay between audience predispositions and issue frames. For the issue we investigated — public dissent during a national crisis — issue framing effects depended on harmonious personal values. This study therefore reinforces the broader point that framing is an interactive process between communicator and audience, not a one-way street (Scheufele, 2000). Furthermore, our study provided evidence about the mechanisms by which frames shape opinions. This issue, like so many, exposes a deep conflict between core sociopolitical values. The framing effects we observed appear to affect opinion via their influence on the relative importance attributed to the value of free speech.

The study of framing effects is a burgeoning research trend. While interest has grown in identifying and describing framing effects, there are also necessary demonstrations of the limitations to framing effects. Druckman (2001b), for example, showed how less credible framing sources have minimal impact. Haider-Markel and Joslyn (2001) indicated that the magnitude of framing effects for the school violence issue hinge on recipient's party identification. The present study shows how individual audience members will vary in their responsiveness to frames, depending on their personal values. Indeed, we found that, absent harmonious personal values, issue framing hardly made a difference in people's opinions. This finding is important in terms of testing an oft-stated assumption of framing research,

as well as for illuminating the framing effect process.

The present study supports the suggestion that framing effects depend upon mindful and conscious judgment processes. Nelson and Oxley (1999) argued that framing depends upon changes in the importance or relevance respondents attached to their beliefs about the objective consequences of policy change. In more recent work, Nelson (2004) has argued that framing alters the relative balance between competing *values*. The importance measures in the present study bear closer resemblance to issue-specific value priorities: “How important is it, in your opinion, for government to do as much as possible to create opportunities for extreme minority opinion to speak out even under national crisis?” Such judgments vary from traditional measures of social values, we argue, because they are issue specific: rather than asking about protection of free speech as a general democratic value, they query the importance of free speech rights in this particular time and circumstance. We believe that the framing effects described here induce the receiver to reconsider the balance to strike between competing values like free speech and national unity. This is not to say, however, that such mindful and conscious judgmental process happens under all conditions, or explain all framing effects. As Price and Tewksbury (1997) point out, under low involvement or low knowledge conditions, framing effects might be the result of mere “top-of-the-head” processes. Therefore it might be very useful to distinguish the contingent nature of framing effect processes.

It is important to note a limitation to the study: our conclusions are based on a single experiment, using a single issue. While we claim support for our theoretical model from these data, it is possible that we would not have obtained comparable results if we designed our experiment around another issue, perhaps even another civil liberties issue (Wells & Windschitl, 1999). We’re not entirely alone, of course; as cited above, the research literature presents several comparable demonstrations that framing effects depend in part on the predispositions of recipients. Still, our original claim about the moderating role of personal values cannot be considered conclusive until it has been demonstrated with other issues.

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APPENDIX A

[Free Speech Issue Frame]

THE FIRST AMENDMENT CRISIS: SHOULD DISSENT BE MUTED IN PATRIOTIC TIMES?

Does silencing extreme opinion make America better?

The surge of national pride that has swept the country after the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11 has sparked the beginnings of a new, more difficult debate over the balance among national security, free speech and patriotism.

In the most highly publicized case, a nationally televised talk show host was shunned by many of his advertisers and criticized by the White House spokesman for making what some considered an unpatriotic remark about American soldiers.

But the debate over whether it is proper to speak in ways that seem to contradict the popular theme of national unity has been played out on smaller stages as well. A college professor in the Southwest has been threatened with disciplinary action for comments he made about the World Trade Center disaster, and at least two small-town journalists have lost their jobs after criticizing the president.

Floyd Abrams, a First Amendment specialist with the Manhattan law firm of Cahill Gordon & Reindel, said the United States often debates issues like patriotism and free speech in times of crisis. "Hard times for the First Amendment tend to come at very hard times for the country," Mr. Abrams said. "When we feel threatened, and when we feel at peril, the First Amendment or First Amendment values should be respected more than other times. Because when we need solid unity of opinion is most risky time to drive us to extreme."

Mr. Peters, who was wearing a small American flag pin on his lapel while he was waiting for his bus, said he believed people should speak freely. "It's difficult for anyone to have freedom and liberty and be secure at the same time," he said. "But criticism is always what we need even if it doesn't seem constructive immediately."

Americans seem to be torn in their feeling of whether traditional support for freedom of speech should be undercut by the need to support the government in times of national crisis. However, recent poll results show that almost 80% of Americans think that freedom of speech should be valued even under national crisis.

[National Unity Issue Frame]

ASSAULTS FROM INSIDE: WHAT'S OUR PRIORITY? NATIONAL UNITY OR DISSENT'S RIGHT TO SPEAK

How far should we be tolerant to "free speech of dissents"?

The surge of national pride that has swept the country after the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11 has sparked the beginnings of a new, more difficult debate over the balance among national security, free speech and patriotism.

In the most highly publicized case, a nationally televised talk show host was shunned by many of his advertisers and criticized by the White House spokesman for making what some considered an unpatriotic remark about American soldiers. But the debate over whether it is proper to speak in ways that seem to contradict the popular theme of national unity has been played out on smaller stages as well.

A college professor in the Southwest has been threatened with disciplinary action for comments he made about the World Trade Center disaster, and at least two small-town journalists have lost their jobs after criticizing the president.

Floyd Abrams, a First Amendment specialist with the Manhattan law firm of Cahill Gordon & Reindel, said the United States often debates issues like patriotism and free speech in times of crisis. "Hard times for the First Amendment tend to come at very hard times for the country," Mr. Abrams said. "When we feel threatened, when we feel at peril, the First Amendment or First Amendment values sometimes should be subordinated to other interests."

"I don't think it's a time for criticism in the way we've criticized Bush or presidents before him," said Jennifer Ricciardi, 28, a worker for a garden service company in Chicago. "Our priority is not the right to free speech but the duty to unity."

Americans seem to be torn in their feeling of whether traditional support for freedom of speech should be undercut by the need to support the government in times of national crisis. However, recent poll results show that almost 80% of Americans think freedom of speech should be limited under serious national crisis.

A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF INDIRECT, VERBAL, AND PHYSICAL AGGRESSION IN TELEVISION PROGRAMS POPULAR AMONG SCHOOL-AGED GIRLS

JENNIFER RUH LINDER AND KELSEY ANN LYLE

A content analysis of indirect, verbal, and physical aggression was conducted of 77 hours of television programming popular among fifth grade girls. Eighty eight percent of programs contained aggression. Physical aggression occurred at a rate of 9.6 acts per hour, whereas indirect and verbal aggression occurred at a rate of 3.7 and 2.8 acts per hour, respectively. Rates of aggression varied by gender, age, and attractiveness of perpetrators, as well as by relationship between perpetrator and victim. Additionally, motivation and consequences of aggressive acts varied by form of aggression. Implications of the findings are discussed in light of current research and theories of media effects.

Keywords: televised aggression, indirect, verbal, physical, children, girls

Existing research indicates that physical aggression is prevalent on television and results in a variety of negative effects on child viewers (Gentile & Sesma, 2003; Paik & Comstock, 1994; Wilson, 2008). Researchers have also investigated the effects of televised depictions of non-physical forms of aggression more typically used by girls, including indirect and verbal aggression. Correlational and experimental research has found that viewing indirect and verbal aggression has negative effects on the behavior and cognitions of children, adolescents, and adults (Banerjee, Greene, Krcmar, & Bagdasarov, 2009; Chory-Assad, 2004; Coyne et al., 2008; Coyne & Archer, 2005; Coyne, Archer, & Eslea, 2004; Linder &

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Gentile, 2009). Despite evidence highlighting the harmful effects of exposure to non-physical forms of media aggression, there is limited research on the portrayal of indirect and verbal aggression on television, especially in programs viewed by young girls. Therefore, the goal of the current study was to document the amount and context of indirect, verbal, and physical aggression in programs popular among fifth grade girls.

PREVALENCE OF TELEVISED AGGRESSION

There have been numerous content analyses of physical aggression on television from the 1960's to the 1990's (for a review, see Hetsroni, 2007). The most comprehensive was the National Television Violence Study (NTVS), which examined violence in 2,700 hours of cable and broadcast programming over a 5-year period in the mid 1990's (Wilson et al., 1997). This study revealed that 69% of children's programs and 57% of non-children's programs contained physical violence, at a frequency of 5.6 acts per hour in adult programming and 14.1 acts per hour in children's programming (Wilson et al., 1997, 2002). A more recent content analysis of a week of primetime programming reported 71.2% of shows contained physical aggression, at an average rate of 9.5 acts per hour (Glascok, 2008).

Many existing content analyses suggest that televised verbal aggression occurs at higher rates than physical aggression. Greenberg, Edison, Korzenny, Fernandez-Collado, and Atkin (1980) reported 22 acts per hour of verbal aggression in prime time programs and 19 acts per hour in Saturday morning programs. Williams, Zabrack, and Joy (1982) reported 7.8 acts per hour of verbal aggression in a sample of 109 programs popular among Canadian viewers. More recent research confirms that verbal aggression occurs more frequently than other forms of aggression in both prime time programming (Glascok, 2008) and in programs popular among adolescents (Feshbach, 2005). In contrast, in a related report of the content analysis presented in this paper, Linder and Gentile (2009) reported that 76 hours of programming popular among fifth grade girls contained an average of only 2.8 acts of verbal aggression per hour. The frequency of verbal aggression therefore appears to vary widely depending on the sample of programs.

Recent evidence indicates that indirect aggression is also prevalent on television. Indirect aggression is a broad term that encompasses a variety of non-physical aggressive acts, including behaviors labeled by researchers as either relational or social aggression (for a review, see Card, Stucky, Sawalani, & Little, 2008). More specifically, indirect aggression refers to methods of inflicting harm covertly through the manipulation of relationships or social status, and includes behaviors such as social exclusion, the silent treatment, and spreading rumors (for a review, see Archer & Coyne, 2005). The current study examined this broader construct, indirect aggression, in order to capture the full range of non-physical acts of aggression portrayed on television, as well as to facilitate comparisons with prior content

analyses. Feshbach (2005) reported that indirect aggression occurred frequently in programs viewed by adolescents, with 93% of female characters in half-hour programs in the sample engaging in indirect aggression. Similarly, Coyne and Archer (2004) found that indirect aggression was present in 92% of 29 programs popular among British adolescents. Regarding frequency of indirect aggression, Coyne and Archer (2004) reported an average rate of 9.3 acts per hour, Glascock (2008) reported 19.2 acts per hour in a sample of primetime programs, and Linder and Gentile (2009) reported 3.7 acts per hour in a sample of programs viewed by young girls.

CONTEXT OF TELEVISED AGGRESSION

Although research on the *amount* of physical, verbal, and indirect aggression on television is important for understanding the potential risks of television exposure for viewers, research on *how* aggression is portrayed on television is also essential. Theories of media violence effects suggest that certain types of televised aggressive acts may be more harmful than others. Specifically, justified and rewarded violence increases aggressive responding by children (Bandura, 1965; Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963a; Berkowitz & Powers, 1979; Hogben, 1998; Wilson et al., 1998). Similarly, characteristics of the perpetrators of aggression on television may affect child responses. Social learning theory and classic studies by Bandura (e.g., 1986; Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963b) suggest that children are more likely to attend to, identify with, and learn from attractive characters, and characters that are high on perceived similarity, such as same-sex and same-age characters. Research has demonstrated that children have enhanced attention to and identification with same-age and same-sex characters (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991; Schmitt, Anderson, & Collins, 1999), which may increase the learning of aggressive behaviors if enacted by such characters (Paik & Comstock, 1994; Potter, 1999). Therefore, it is important to document the context of aggression on television, including motivation, consequences, and characteristics of perpetrators, in order to understand the potential effects on child viewers.

Televised physical aggression is often portrayed in ways that may enhance learning of aggression. The National Television Violence Study reported that nearly three quarters of violent acts on television were unpunished, nearly half the acts were portrayed as justified, and perpetrators often possessed qualities that might result in the viewer identifying with the character (Wilson et al., 1997). Within children's programming, 36% of perpetrators had characteristics that made them appealing to children, 30% of violence was portrayed as justified, and 81% of violent scenes did not show punishment for the aggressor (Wilson et al., 2002).

Less is known about the context of televised verbal and indirect aggression. Coyne and Archer (2004) reported that the indirect aggression in programs popular among British

adolescents was often justified and rewarded and usually took place within intimate relationships. In contrast, verbal aggression was usually unjustified and had no consequences more frequently than it was rewarded or punished. Perpetrators of indirect aggression were also more likely to be physically attractive compared to perpetrators of other types of aggression. With regards to gender, perpetrators of indirect aggression on television are more likely to be female, despite the fact that sampled programs contained nearly twice as many male characters (Coyne & Archer, 2004; Glascock, 2008). These findings suggest that televised indirect and verbal aggression is modeled in close relationships and may be portrayed in ways that increase learning of aggression, especially by female viewers.

THE CURRENT STUDY

One limitation of the majority of the existing research is that it is not possible to accurately assess television aggression exposure for *children* based on these data. Although some children may be exposed to children's programming more frequently than adult programming, it is well documented that children frequently prefer to watch adult programming (Rosengren & Windahl, 1989). In the United States, the proportion of children who view children's educational and entertainment programming begins to steadily decline at about age 8, and there is an increase in preference for genres such as sitcoms and dramas (Cantor, 1998; Roberts & Foehr, 2004). There are also gender differences in television content preferences. For example, among a sample of children ages 8-10, significantly more girls than boys reported watching comedies, music videos, and educational programs (Roberts & Foehr, 2004). Therefore, research which examines aggression in programs specifically nominated as popular among girls (regardless of the genre or age rating of the programs) is the most valid for estimating aggressive content exposure in this population.

A second limitation of existing research is the dearth of information on the context of verbal and indirect aggression on television, which may limit our understanding of the effects of aggressive media on *girls*. Although televised depictions of non-physical forms of aggression may affect boys, as well as individuals of all ages, verbal and indirect aggression on television may be especially salient for preadolescent girls. During this developmental period, girls engage in less physical aggression than boys (for a review, see Card et al., 2008), and instead use indirect and verbal aggression (Archer, Pearson, & Westeman, 1988; Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, & Peltonen, 1988). As a result, viewing indirect and verbal aggression may have greater effects on girls during this age period. It is especially important to document how these types of aggression are portrayed in the media, because girls may turn to the media to gather information about the social norms and consequences of using these forms of gender-normative aggression. Therefore, the current study focused on acts of aggression in programs popular among fifth grade girls.

In summary, although many content analyses of televised aggression exist in the literature, we are not aware of any that have documented the content of programs specifically nominated as popular among young girls. Additionally, there is limited research on the *context* of verbal and indirect aggression on television, the forms of aggression most often used by girls. The current study consists of a content analysis of programs popular among fifth grade girls, and examines several contextual variables of the televised aggressive acts that prior research suggest may alter effects on viewer aggression. Specifically, the following research questions were examined with regards to television programs nominated by school-aged girls: (1) How frequent is relational, physical, and verbal aggression? (2) What are the characteristics (e.g., gender, age, attractiveness, and race) of perpetrators of each type of aggression? (3) How does the relationship between the perpetrator and victim differ by type of aggression? (4) How is the motivation for the act, and consequences portrayed?

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 99 fifth grade girls from three schools in a suburban area of the Northwest. Participants were 10 or 11 years of age ($M = 10.6$, $SD = .50$). Seventy-six percent of the participants were Caucasian, 16.5% were Hispanic, and 7.5% were other ethnicities.

Procedures

All fifth grade girls in three target schools were invited to participate. Consent rate was approximately 70%. Participants completed several questionnaires, including a media habits questionnaire, in a group setting.

Sample of Programs

Each participant was asked to name her three favorite television programs. Of 294 total responses, 33 responses were omitted because they were names of television networks ($n = 12$), movies ($n = 10$), or were Spanish programs ($n = 11$). The remaining responses yielded a list of 108 different programs. Of these, 22 were no longer on the air at the time of coding and nine were available only through satellite service, and therefore were excluded. The remaining programs ($n = 77$) were included in the analysis. A list of all shows by genre can be seen in the Appendix.

Aggression Coding System

One hour of programming of each show (excluding commercials) was randomly recorded and analyzed for indirect, physical, and verbal aggression by the second author and one of seven other trained coders. No reliability estimates were calculated because all programs were double-coded and a consensus procedure was used, requiring 100% agreement among coders. The coding system was a modification of an aggression inventory by Coyne and Archer (2004). Behaviors with the intent to harm were considered acts of aggression. For each act, the type of aggression was recorded, as well as contextual variables that described the incident.

Type of aggression. Aggressive acts were classified as either indirect (30 behaviors), physical (26 behaviors), or verbal (five behaviors). Indirect aggression was defined as an attempt to hurt someone's reputation, social status, and/or relationships or the use of someone's relationships to manipulate or hurt (e.g., "Pretend to be hurt or angry to make someone feel bad"). Verbal aggression was defined as a direct attempt to hurt someone's feelings with words or gestures (e.g., "Calling a mean name"). Physical aggression was defined as an attempt to physically harm or threaten someone or their possessions (e.g., "Hitting or punching with a closed fist").

Each uninterrupted aggressive act was recorded. Scene changes or another character speaking or acting was considered an interruption, and any subsequent aggression was coded as a separate act. Simultaneous acts of aggression were assigned separate codes. For example, if a character hit someone while shouting "I hate you," this was coded as both physical and verbal aggression.

Characteristics of the perpetrator. For each act, the gender, age, attractiveness, and race of all the perpetrators were recorded. Gender was not recorded if the perpetrator was a gender-neutral animal or monster. Age was coded using the following categories: child (birth-age 12), adolescent (age 13-19), and adult (age 20 and older). Attractiveness of all human perpetrators (including animated characters) was coded as either "attractive" (high number of characteristics found to be attractive in Western culture), "average" (some attractive characteristics), or "unattractive" (few attractive characteristics) (for details, see Coyne & Archer, 2004). The race variable was not analyzed, due to the small cell sizes for non-Caucasian ethnicities and the high frequency of animated characters with unclear ethnicities.

Relationship between perpetrator and victim. The following categories were used to classify the relationship between the perpetrator and victim: strangers, acquaintances, friends, family members, romantic partners, ex-romantic relationship, student/teacher,

colleagues, law enforcement personnel/criminal, enemies/rivals, roommates, and employee/employer. For the current study, these categories were collapsed into two categories. An *intimate relationship* category was used for close relationships that persist over time and included friends, family members, and romantic partners. All other relationship categories were combined to form the category *non-intimate relationship*.

Motivation for the aggressive act. Two variables described the motivation for each aggressive incident. Each act was coded as either (1) reactive or proactive, and (2) justified or unjustified. An act was recorded as *reactive* if it was in response to an actual or perceived act of aggression from another (e.g., using aggression as revenge); all other acts were coded as *proactive*. An act was coded as *justified* if it was portrayed as self defense or as necessary to gain a greater good (e.g., acts of aggression against a villain); all other acts were coded as *unjustified*.

Consequences. Two variables, *reward* and *punishment*, captured information about the immediate or delayed consequences of each aggressive act. Aggression was coded as having a reward if the perpetrator gained something positive as a result of the aggression (e.g., obtained a desired goal), whereas it was coded as having a punishment if there was a negative consequence for the perpetrator as a result of the aggression (e.g., loss of power).

RESULTS

Amount and Type of Aggression

A majority of the programs (88.3%) contained some type of aggression. 76.6% of the programs contained indirect aggression, 71.4% contained physical aggression, and 68.8% contained verbal aggression. In the 77 hours of programming, there were a total of 1,234 acts of aggression, or an average of 16.03 acts per hour (Median = 12.00, $SD = 18.33$). Of the total acts, 59.8% were classified as physical aggression, 22.9% were indirect aggression, and 17.2% were verbal aggression. There were an average of 9.58 acts of physical aggression per hour (Median = 2.00, $SD = 17.09$, range = 0-111), 3.68 acts of indirect aggression per hour (Median = 3.00, $SD = 3.55$, range = 0-18), and 2.77 acts of verbal aggression per hour (Median = 2.00, $SD = 4.24$, range = 0-32).

A MANOVA was conducted to determine if the amount of indirect, physical, and verbal aggression varied across genre. Due to the small number of shows classified as “game shows” and “other,” these shows were not included the analysis. Results revealed significant differences in the amount of physical aggression across genres ($F(3, 68) = 7.63, p < .001$). LSD Post hoc tests revealed that there was a significantly higher amount of physical

aggression in cartoons ($M = 21.24$, $SD = 24.28$) than in dramas ($M = 9.69$, $SD = 11.84$) sitcoms ($M = 1.74$, $SD = 1.60$) or reality shows ($M = .25$, $SD = .46$). There were no significant differences in the amount of indirect or verbal aggression across genres.

In order to examine whether contextual variables varied by type of aggression, a series of Chi-square analyses were conducted. In cases where a significant chi-square value was obtained, standardized residuals for cell frequencies were examined to determine which observed cell frequencies varied from expected frequencies at a level greater than chance ($Z_{crit} (\alpha = .05) = 1.96$).

Characteristics of Perpetrators

The total and percentage of acts of indirect, verbal, and physical aggression by perpetrator characteristics can be seen in Table 1.

Gender. In order to determine whether male and female perpetrators differed in the type of aggression used, a Chi-square analysis was conducted. Acts in which a mixed-gender group was the perpetrator and acts in which the perpetrator gender could not be identified were excluded. A Chi-square test of independence comparing perpetrator gender with type of aggression was significant ($\chi^2 (2, N = 1138) = 93.01, p < .001, \Phi_c = .29$). Male perpetrators were more likely to use physical aggression and less likely to use verbal and indirect aggression than expected given the prevalence of these types of aggression in the programs. Females were more likely to use indirect and verbal aggression and less likely to use physical aggression than expected. An additional Chi-square analysis explored type of aggression by gender composition of the perpetrator-victim dyad. A majority of all acts of aggression (89.5%) occurred between dyads rather than within groups; therefore aggressive acts that occurred within groups were excluded from the analysis due to small cell sizes. The Chi-square test was significant ($\chi^2 (6, N = 1062) = 144.74, p < .001, \Phi_c = .26$). In female dyads, indirect and verbal aggression occurred more than expected and physical aggression occurred less than expected, whereas in male dyads, physical aggression occurred more and indirect and verbal aggression occurred less than expected. Male-to female aggression and female-to-male aggression was more likely to be verbal than expected.

Age. A Chi-square test of independence comparing perpetrator age with type of aggression was significant ($\chi^2 (4, N = 1150) = 23.18, p < .001, \Phi_c = .10$). Adolescent perpetrators were less likely to use verbal aggression than expected, whereas adult perpetrators were more likely to use verbal aggression.

Table 1

Total and Percentage of Acts of Aggression by Perpetrator Characteristics

	Type of Aggression		
	Indirect	Verbal	Physical
Gender			
Male	136 (18%) ^b	107 (14%) ^b	524 (68%) ^a
Female	130 (35%) ^a	99 (27%) ^a	142 (38%) ^b
Gender of perpetrator-to-victim dyad			
Male-to male	90 (16%) ^b	60 (11%) ^b	404 (73%) ^a
Female-to-female	74 (48%) ^a	44 (28%) ^a	37 (24%) ^b
Male-to-female	34 (23%)	41 (28%) ^a	73 (49%)
Female-to-male	50 (24%)	51 (25%) ^a	104 (51%)
Age			
Child	31 (30%)	20 (19%)	52 (50%)
Adolescent	107 (28%)	43 (11%) ^b	229 (60%)
Adult	140 (21%)	146 (22%) ^a	382 (57%)
Attractiveness			
Attractive	188 (29%) ^a	102 (16%)	362 (56%)
Average	65 (21%)	74 (24%) ^a	164 (54%)
Unattractive	16 (9%) ^b	26 (15%)	130 (76%) ^a

^a standardized residual for cell was significantly *greater* than expected by chance ($p < .05$)

^b standardized residual for cell was significantly *less* than expected by chance ($p < .05$)

Attractiveness. A Chi-square test of independence comparing attractiveness with type of aggression was significant ($\chi^2(4, N = 1127) = 43.15, p < .001, \Phi_c = .14$). Perpetrators of indirect aggression were more likely to be attractive and less likely to be unattractive than expected, whereas perpetrators of physical aggression were more likely to be unattractive

than expected. Additionally, perpetrators of verbal aggression were more likely to be average in attractiveness.

Relationship between Perpetrator and Victim. The total and percentage of acts of aggression by closeness of the relationship between the perpetrator and victim can be seen in Table 2. A Chi-square test comparing relationship with type of aggression was significant ($\chi^2 (2, N = 1209) = 122.53, p < .001, \Phi_c = .32$). Indirect and verbal aggression were more likely than expected to occur between individuals in intimate relationships, and indirect aggression was less likely than expected to occur in non-intimate relationships. In contrast, physical aggression was more likely to occur in non-intimate relationships and less likely to occur in intimate relationships.

Motivation and Consequences of Aggression. The total and percentage of acts of indirect, verbal, and physical aggression by motivation and consequences can be seen in Table 3. A Chi-square test of independence comparing type of aggression and whether the acts were portrayed as reactive was significant ($\chi^2 (2, N = 1235) = 116.52, p < .001, \Phi_c = .31$). Indirect aggression was portrayed as reactive less than expected whereas physical aggression was portrayed as reactive more than expected, given the frequency of reactive aggression. A Chi-square test of independence comparing type of aggression and whether the acts were portrayed as justified was also significant ($\chi^2 (2, N = 1235) = 110.99, p < .001, \Phi_c = .30$). Indirect and verbal aggression were portrayed as justified less than expected and physical aggression was portrayed as justified more than expected. A Chi-square test of independence comparing consequences by type of aggression was significant ($\chi^2 (4, N = 1235) = 125.06, p < .001, \Phi_c = .23$). Verbal aggression was punished more and had no consequences less than expected, whereas physical aggression was punished less and had no consequences more than expected, given the frequency of total aggressive acts that were punished, rewarded, or had no consequences.

DISCUSSION

The current study examined the amount and context of indirect, verbal, and physical aggression in television programs popular among fifth grade girls. All forms of aggression were prevalent, and each type of aggression was portrayed in different ways. Regarding the amount of aggression, the majority of programs (88%) contained some form of aggression. Of the programs that contained aggression, the highest percentage of programs contained indirect aggression (77%), followed by physical aggression (71%) and verbal aggression (69%). In addition, there were almost three times as many acts of physical aggression per hour as acts of indirect or verbal aggression.

Table 2

Total and Percentage of Acts of Aggression by Relationship of Perpetrator and Victim

Type of Relationship	Type of Aggression		
	Indirect	Verbal	Physical
Non-Intimate	178 (18%) ^b	152 (16%)	156 (66%) ^a
Intimate	103 (45%) ^a	65 (28%) ^a	62 (27%) ^b

^a standardized residual for cell was significantly *greater* than expected by chance ($p < .05$)

^b standardized residual for cell was significantly *less* than expected by chance ($p < .05$)

The current findings differed slightly from previous content analyses of televised aggression. Specifically, a slightly higher percentage of programs contained physical aggression than was found in the National Television Violence Study (Wilson et al., 1997, 2002), but this percentage was consistent with a more recent content analysis (Glascock, 2008), as was the number of acts of physical aggression per hour (9.6 acts per hour) (Glascock, 2008; Wilson et al., 1997, 2002). In contrast, both the percentage of shows containing indirect aggression and the frequency per hour of verbal and indirect aggression was much lower than has been reported previously (Coyne & Archer, 2004; Feshbach, 2005; Glascock, 2008; Greenberg et al., 1980; Williams et al., 1982). These discrepancies from past research are likely due to the unique sample of programs nominated by participants in the current study. First, the large number of fantasy violence programs in the current sample may account for the high percentage of shows containing physical aggression, because these programs contained sustained fighting sequences. Second, Coyne and Archer (2004) found that the highest levels of indirect aggression occurred in soap operas, which was not a genre nominated by any girls in our sample. However, it is unclear why we found lower levels of verbal aggression than have previously been found, especially given the high number of sitcoms, a genre that has previously been found to contain the highest amount of verbal aggression (e.g. Glascock, 2008), in the current analysis.

These results highlight several concerns regarding the types of televised aggression to which young girls may be exposed. Although fewer programs contained physical aggression compared to indirect aggression, the frequency data suggest that when physical aggression is present in television programs, it is at higher levels. Additionally, there were no differences across genres in indirect or verbal aggression. Therefore, although young girls

Table 3

Total and Percentage of Acts of Aggression by Motivation and Consequences

	Type of Aggression		
	Indirect	Verbal	Physical
Motivation			
Reactive	56 (20%) ^b	76 (36%)	414 (56%) ^a
Proactive	227 (80%) ^a	137 (64%)	325 (43%) ^b
Justified	14 (5%) ^b	10 (5%) ^b	214 (29%) ^a
Unjustified	269 (95%) ^a	203 (95%) ^a	525 (71%) ^b
Consequences			
Rewarded	90 (32%)	71 (33%)	187 (25%)
Punished	37 (13%)	87 (41%) ^a	93 (13%) ^b
None	156 (55%)	55 (26%) ^b	459 (62%) ^a

^a standardized residual for cell was significantly *greater* than expected by chance ($p < .05$)

^b standardized residual for cell was significantly *less* than expected by chance ($p < .05$)

may be exposed to greater amounts of televised physical aggression than other forms, indirect and verbal aggression may be the most ubiquitous. That is, non-physical forms of aggression are present in more shows and a greater variety of shows than is physical aggression. Because indirect and verbal aggression are not considered by the media industry when assigning program age or content ratings, parents who are concerned about all forms of television aggression will find it challenging to monitor their children's exposure to non-physical aggressive content.

An additional goal of the current study was to document the context of aggression on television, including characteristics of perpetrators, relationship between perpetrators and victims, and consequences and motivation for aggressive acts. This information is useful for determining potential effects of televised aggression on young viewers, because these

contextual variables can moderate media effects. The findings revealed that physical, indirect, and verbal aggression are portrayed in different ways on television.

The portrayal of gender differences in perpetration of different forms of aggression tended to mirror existing gender norms held by children about aggression. Male perpetration involved physical aggression more than expected, whereas female perpetration was more likely to involve verbal or indirect aggression. This was true in same-sex dyads, whereas within mixed-sex dyads both males and females were more likely to use verbal aggression. Girls this age have parallel normative beliefs as were portrayed on television—that males more frequently use physical aggression, females are more likely to use non-overt forms of aggression, and verbal insults are the most common form of aggression used in mixed-sex interactions (Crick, Bigbee, & Howes, 1996). Interestingly, recent research indicates that although boys do engage in higher levels of physical aggression, there are minimal gender differences in indirect aggression (Card et al., 2008), suggesting these beliefs regarding gender differences in indirect aggression are inaccurate. It may be that the media contributes to the development of young girls' stereotypical (and false) beliefs about gender norms regarding aggression. At the very least, the media may confirm and perpetuate these beliefs.

These gender differences in televised aggression portrayals may also contribute to aggressive behaviors in young female viewers. Wishful identification, the desire to behave similarly to television characters, is higher for same-sex characters, especially among girls (Hoffner, 1996) and longitudinal data suggests that childhood identification with same-sex aggressive characters predicts aggressive behavior in adulthood (Huesmann, Moise-Titus, Podolski, & Eron, 2003). Current results indicated that female perpetrators of aggression were more likely to use verbal and indirect aggression; therefore future research should investigate whether young girls are more likely than boys to develop these forms of aggression as a result of viewing.

The results revealed minimal differences in the type of aggression used by perpetrators of different ages. Findings regarding age were limited to verbal aggression — adolescent perpetrators were less likely to use verbal aggression than expected, whereas adult perpetrators were more likely to use verbal aggression. Because the current study did not control for the number of characters of different ages appearing in television programs, it is difficult to interpret these findings. Given that viewers may be more likely to identify with same-age characters, future research should investigate age differences in the types of aggression used by television characters.

Attractiveness of perpetrators varied significantly across aggression type. Most notably, perpetrators of indirect aggression were more likely to be attractive than expected, whereas perpetrators of physical aggression were more likely to be unattractive. A consideration of these findings within theoretical frameworks of media effects suggests that viewing television may be a risk factor for indirect aggression in young girls via at least two distinct processes. First, child viewers may develop norms from television about the types

of individuals who use different forms of aggression that may increase their own use of indirect aggression. Cultivation theory (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994) posits that cumulative exposure to media shapes viewers' perceptions of reality. The norm that is portrayed in this sample of programs is that attractive individuals use indirect aggression. Associating indirect aggression perpetration with attractiveness may normalize and glamorize the behavior. Second, based on social learning theory and past research, it is predicted that viewers may be more likely to imitate televised aggression that is perpetrated by attractive characters (e.g., Bandura, 1986).

The programs in the current content analysis also portrayed specific norms about the forms of aggression used within different types of relationships. Indirect and verbal aggression were more frequent than expected within close, intimate relationships and indirect aggression was less frequent in relationships characterized as non-intimate (e.g., strangers). The reverse pattern was seen for physical aggression. Crick and colleagues (e.g., Crick et al., 1999) have suggested that relationally aggressive girls have learned from family interactions to value close, intense relationships and that relational aggression is effective for achieving and maintaining closeness. The disproportionately higher frequency of acts of indirect aggression within close relationships on television suggests that media may function similarly as a socialization factor contributing to the development of relational aggression. Indeed, children report that they like to watch television, specifically adult programs, to learn social lessons, such as how to behave in relationships (Valkenburg, 2004).

Another contextual factor previously identified as a moderator of media effects is the motivation for the aggressive act. The current study analyzed two types of motivation—whether acts were portrayed as reactive, and whether the acts were justified. Consistent with existing content analyses of children's programming (e.g., Wilson et al., 2002), over half of physical aggression was portrayed as reactive and almost one third of physical aggression was portrayed as justified. Additionally, indirect aggression was less likely than expected to be portrayed as reactive and justified, and verbal aggression was less likely than expected to be portrayed as justified. Children are more likely to judge televised violence as morally acceptable if it is provoked (Krcmar & Cooke, 1991) and to imitate aggression that is justified (e.g., Berkowitz & Powers, 1979); therefore, acts of physical aggression were more likely to be portrayed in ways that may result increase viewer aggression. On the other hand, there is evidence that viewing *unjustified* physical aggression increases fear in viewers (e.g., Potter, 2008) and almost all (95%) of the acts of indirect and verbal aggression were portrayed as unjustified. It is unclear whether viewing unjustified indirect and verbal aggression would have a similar effect; this should be investigated by future research.

The last contextual variable examined in the current study was the consequences of the aggressive acts. Across all types of aggression, the majority of televised aggression resulted in no consequences for the perpetrator. However, acts of verbal aggression were punished more than expected and resulted in no consequences less than expected. Therefore,

consequences (including punishments and rewards) were shown most frequently for verbal aggression. In contrast, physical aggression had no consequences shown more than expected and was punished less than expected, and over half of all acts of indirect aggression also had no consequences shown. This finding is concerning because there is evidence that children are as likely to imitate aggression with no consequences as they are to imitate rewarded aggression (Bandura, 1965). In addition, only 13% of acts of both physical and indirect aggression were punished, and over one quarter of acts of indirect, verbal, and physical aggression were rewarded. Based on social learning theory, the lack of consistent negative outcomes for aggression on television increases the risk of increased aggression in viewers.

There were several limitations of the current study. First, the coding system used in the current study did not code for the number and characteristics (e.g., age, gender) of all the characters in each program. Because we were unable to control for frequency of different types of characters (e.g. the number of child characters in each program) in the analyses, we could not make absolute comparisons of perpetration by different types of characters. For example, although child characters were less frequently perpetrators of aggression than characters of other ages, it is unclear whether this was simply the result of the lower number of child characters in the programs. Second, only one hour of programming was coded for each show, and levels of aggression might vary substantial across episodes of a television series. Additionally, several of the programs nominated by participants were not included in the content analysis because they were no longer on the air or were in Spanish, which may limit the validity of the findings.

There were several aspects of the current study that increase the validity and practical significance of the findings. The sample consisted of programs that were nominated by young girls as their favorite shows. Therefore, the results may provide a more accurate estimate of aggressive television exposure for children than content analyses based on random samples of television. To our knowledge, this content analysis was also one of the first to include both overt and non-overt forms of aggression. Additionally, the inclusion of contextual variables in the coding system allowed for the estimation of “high risk” aggression (i.e., aggression that is portrayed in ways that increase learning of aggression) exposure. Finally, the large number of programs and the variety of programs included in the sample increase the generalizability of the findings. Although these programs were selected by fifth grade girls, many of these programs are also widely viewed by other age groups and by males, so these findings also provide some insight into levels of television aggression exposure among other populations.

In conclusion, the results revealed that verbal and indirect aggression are prevalent in television programs popular among young girls. Although these forms of aggression occur on television at lower frequencies than physical aggression, non-physical aggression is often portrayed in ways that increase the risk of learning of aggression by viewers. Future research should continue to examine the portrayal of all forms of aggression on television, including

how the motivation and consequences of verbal and indirect aggressive acts may vary by the characteristics of the perpetrators. For example, past research has indicated that child characters are most likely to engage in high-risk violence (i.e., violence that is portrayed in ways that increase learning) on television (Wilson, Colvin, & Smith, 2002). Similar analyses should be conducted with respect to verbal and indirect aggression, especially in light of recent findings of associations between television exposure to high-risk verbal and indirect aggression and negative outcomes in children (Linder & Gentile, 2009). Research that provides a detailed picture of the televised aggression landscape is essential for obtaining a better understanding of media exposure as a risk factor for the development of both physical and non-physical forms of aggression in children.

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Appendix: Television Shows Included in the Content Analysis

<i>Cartoons (n = 25)</i>		
Avatar, the Last Airbender	Fairly Odd Parents	Rugrats
Brandy and Mr. Whiskers	Family Guy	Scoobydoo
Case Closed	Inuyasha	Simpsons, The
Courage the Cowardly Dog	Kim Possible	Sponge Bob Square Pants
Cyberchase	King of the Hill	Teen Titans
Danny Phantom	Lilo and Stitch	Totally Spies
Digimon	Maya and Miguel	Yu-Gi-Oh
Dragonball Z	Pokemon	
Ed, Ed, and Eddy	Proud Family	
<i>Sitcoms (n = 23)</i>		
70's Show, That	Hope and Faith	Sister Sister
8 Simple Rules	I Love Lucy	That's So Raven
Boy Meets World	Lizzy Maquire	Suite Life of Zach and Cody, The
Cosby Show, The	Malcolm in the Middle	Unfabulous
Fresh Prince of Bellaire, The	One on One	What I Like about You
Friends	Everybody Loves Raymond	Will and Grace
Full House	Sabrina	Zoey 101
Home Improvement	Seinfeld	
<i>Dramas (n = 16)</i>		
7th Heaven	FBI Files	O.C., The
Angel	Gilmore Girls	Saddle Club
Bonanza	Lassie	Smallville
Buffy the Vampire Slayer	Law and Order	Summerland
Charmed	Lost	
CSI: Crime Scene Investigation	MASH	
<i>Reality Shows (n = 8)</i>		
American Idol	Endurance	Surreal Life, The
Animal Cops	Fear Factor	Survivor
Cops	Simple Life, The	
<i>Game shows (n = 2)</i>		
Family Feud	Price is Right	
<i>Other (n = 3)</i>		
Mad TV	Total Request Live	Mythbusters

A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF MALE VIDEO GAME CHARACTERS OVER 20 YEARS

MONICA K. MILLER AND ALICIA SUMMERS

Video games, and the magazines that promote them, are popular social artifacts that have potential to shape players' behaviors, attitudes, and identities. Video game magazines have become increasingly popular, necessitating the study of their evolution. In the current study, 300 male characters, spanning 20 years of games, were assessed. Results indicated that male characters have become more masculine over time, as depicted by their increased muscularity and powerful body types. Male characters have more realistic abilities and are more likely to use weapons in recent games. Results are discussed in terms of potential implications for player's self perceptions, attitudes, and behavior, particularly if players seek to emulate the characters.

Keywords: video games, self perceptions, attitudes, body types, content analysis

Video games are a multi-billion dollar industry (Annual U.S. Video Game Sales, 2005) and enjoyed by 97% of American children (MacArthur Foundation, 2008). Although both boys and girls play, males spend considerably more time playing (13 compared to 5 hours weekly; Gentile, Lynch, Linder, & Walsh, 2004), and are more likely to play daily (a third of boys compared to 11% of girls; Olson, Kutner, & Warner, 2007), making the content of video games particularly interesting for the male consumer. As games have become increasingly popular, so too has the popularity of video game magazines, which often

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provide in-depth articles describing the new games and characters. To illustrate this popularity, the official magazine for the Xbox sold more than 400,000 copies in 2006, and the official magazine for the Playstation sold 305,000 magazines (Future Publishing, 2006) in the same year.

This popularity has prompted concern about the content of such games because, like other media, they have potential to influence behavior and attitudes. Games have portrayed men as muscular, violent and powerful (Burgess, Stermer, & Burgess, 2007). This may have serious implications for males who are the most frequent consumers of video games (Ogletree & Drake, 2007), such as setting standards men cannot achieve or encouraging aggressive attitudes and behaviors. Games (and other media) influence what many members of society feel is acceptable and normative (e.g., what behavior and attitudes are considered “masculine”). Further, media may also send a message that masculinity is linked to power/violence. This also has potential implications for violent or aggressive behavior directed against women or others. Because of these implications, it is important to study how characters are portrayed.

It is possible that the portrayal of male characters has changed over time. In essence, game designers may change the characters’ appearance and abilities in order to come up with something “new and different” that will entice consumers. For instance, recent characters may be portrayed as more violent and muscular than in the past, or they may be more likely to be humans (e.g., soldiers) rather than animals or non-human characters. With advancing technology and consumer demand for more extreme games, it is likely that game manufacturers have responded by changing game content (e.g., becoming more realistic looking). For instance, consumers may become desensitized by playing games, which encourages the manufacture of more exciting games. This may translate into the development of more realistic (e.g., human instead of animal characters) and extreme (e.g., more violent) games. As such, characters may have become more hypermasculine (e.g., powerful soldiers). This is problematic, as technologically advanced games may have a bigger impact on players (Ivory & Kalyanaraman, 2007). As such, it is an important first step to understand how game characters have changed over time. Only then can research examine how the changing portrayal may influence behaviors and attitudes.

The purpose of the study is to investigate how depictions of male video game characters have changed from 1988 to 2007. Several studies have already looked at the portrayal of women in video games (e.g., Burgess et al., 2007; Ivory, 2006; Miller & Summers, 2007), but research has largely neglected studying the portrayal of men. Further, changes in games over the years has largely been unstudied until now. The current study will also expand on previous studies by looking at more detailed articles (as opposed to brief advertisements) and use previously unused variables. The current research will fill these gaps. Specifically, this content analysis will determine whether the masculinity and realism relating to male characters’ appearance, abilities and weapons has changed over the years.

THE IMPACT OF VIDEO GAMES

Mass media does not represent the world exactly as it is; instead, it creates a distorted reality. Cultivation Theory (Gerbner, 1999) proposes that the media sends messages about how things in the world work, what things in the world are, and how to react to these things. These messages can affect consumers' schemas, which can be defined as "an integrated mental network of knowledge, beliefs and expectations concerning a particular topic or aspect of the world" (Wade & Tavis, 2008, p 227). Thus, media messages that communicate that men should be powerful, violent and successful provide knowledge of what constitutes a "man," and how to relate to a man. Such schemas affect a person's actions, beliefs, expectations and emotions. In sum, media messages can affect one's general functioning in the world.

It is no surprise that there is concern about media messages that communicate distorted perceptions of reality. Much of the concern focuses on the relationship between media and aggression. Despite some evidence to the contrary (Griffiths, 1999; Kutner & Olsen, 2008), many professionals believe there is a relationship between exposure to violent media and violent or anti-social acts (e.g., American Academy of Pediatrics et al., 2000). A group of professional associations (e.g., American Psychological Association, American Medical Association, and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry) provided a public statement to Congress regarding their official position: there is a powerful relationship between media violence and aggressive behavior in some children (American Academy of Pediatrics et al., 2000). Another concern is the effects media can have on consumers' self perceptions. If viewing media has a negative impact on body image and self esteem, as earlier research has indicated (e.g., Barlett, Harris, Smith, & Bonds-Raacke, 2005), it is important to determine what messages are presented and the impact they have. Violence and self perceptions, discussed next, are two areas of concern that have been the subject of much study.

Media and Violence

Although it is doubtful that media could lead someone to commit a serious crime, there is concern about the influence of media violence on behavior (Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Bessenoff, 2006; Sparks & Sparks, 2002). Numerous studies have shown a relationship between playing violent games and aggressive or uncooperative behavior (Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Anderson, Gentile & Buckley, 2007; Sheese & Graziano, 2005; Sherry, 2001). In a review of studies using a variety of methods, Anderson (2004) determined that game play is related to an increase in aggressive cognitions, emotions, pro-violence attitudes and actions, and a decrease in pro-social behavior and empathy. As with any controversial

topic, some critics of these studies refute these results, arguing that game play has little meaningful effect on players' violent behavior (Olson, 2004; Savage, 2004) or only affects players with predispositions for aggression (Unsworth, Devilly, & Ward, 2007). Because games often portray characters as being violent (Burgess et al., 2007), there is concern that viewing video games (and possibly magazines portraying these games) could lead players to model violent behaviors. This effect may be intensified in newer games, as technologically advanced games have been shown to increase players' sense of presence, involvement and physiological arousal (Ivory & Kalyanaraman, 2007). Thus, it is important to study the messages media send.

Media and Self Perceptions

Media may also play a role in determining self-perceptions of individuals. Unlike aggression and violence, no studies have examined the impact of video game portrayals on self-perceptions. However, other research indicates that socialization of individuals as to appropriate behaviors and attitudes can occur, in part, through the media (Carpenter, 1998; Milkie, 1994). Exposure to media can influence a person's body image, self esteem, and gender expectations (Barlett et al., 2005; Bessenoff, 2006; Ward, Hansbrough, & Walker, 2005). Various forms of media, including video games, may portray improbable images and behavior (Dietz, 1998) that display stereotypic messages which may shape the consumer's attitudes (Ward et al., 2005). Young children might be even more susceptible to these portrayals, as they are developing their own attitudes (Berry, 2003). Games that portray men as violent and overly masculine may impact young boys' developing conceptualizations of the world. For example, some games allow men to have a variety of weapons, have sex with women characters and bulk up their physique through in-game accomplishments. Boys might understand this to mean that they need to be muscle bound, women-courting, gun-toting heroes who save the world. Falling short of this ideal could have negative effects for males—and for the females they encounter.

Some studies have focused on the physical characteristics of men in media, such as their portrayal as overly muscular (Barlett et al., 2005; Morrison, Kalin & Morrison, 2004). For instance, when males viewed muscular actors or models in magazines, they tended to express more negative body images and were more likely to engage in negative behavior, such as use of steroids (Morrison et al.). A similar result was found when men were exposed to muscular action figures; males who handled action figures with abnormally high muscle mass demonstrated more negative body attitudes than those exposed to more normally proportioned action figures (Barlett et al.). As other forms of media have been shown to impact males' attitudes, it is important to examine the portrayal of males in video games, and how they might be evolving over time.

PRIOR VIDEO GAME STUDIES

Research has been increasingly studying the content of video games, examining actual video games, video game covers, advertisements and video game magazines. The vast majority of these studies have discovered that video game characters are more likely to be males. In fact, male characters are two to three times more likely to occur in games than females (Burgess et al., 2007; Miller & Summers, 2007; Scharrer, 2004). Studies have also analyzed the violent content and masculine appearance of these male characters.

Violent Content

Several content analyses have focused on the violence in video games; such violent content in games is often very high. Recent studies have found 79% (Dietz, 1998) and 89% (Children Now, 2001) of games to have some violent content. Further, 66% of male characters are portrayed as violent (Burgess et al., 2007) and 83% of male characters are portrayed as aggressive (Dill & Thill, 2007). Even in game advertisements, more than half depict some form of violence (Scharrer, 2004). The covers of video games are often violent as well; 65% of covers portrayed male characters as violent and 38% portrayed female characters as violent (Burgess, Stermer & Burgess, 2007). No study to date has measured changes in violence over time.

Masculine Appearance

Another common theme often found in analyses of video games is the masculine appearance of males. Hypermasculinity is a term used to describe exaggerated “macho” characteristics, including acts of violence and anti-social behavior (see Sharrer, 2004). It also describes an orientation in which weakness, emotion, and sensitivity are avoided. Similarly, Connell (1987) proposes Hegemonic Masculinity Theory, which posits that masculinity is socially constructed ideal that not all men can achieve. This ideal prescribes that men should be powerful, aggressive, and successful. This over-simplified ideal (and the corresponding femism ideal) perpetuate myths about gender when people believe them and act accordingly. According to these definitions, a character who is hypermasculine would be more likely to be a muscle-bound soldier who uses machine guns to kill enemies rather than a carefree, innocent impish-looking young man on a mission to collect magic mushrooms and avoiding falling trees and other obstacles.

Previous content analyses of video games or video game magazines have indicated that males are often portrayed as hypermasculine, aggressive, powerful and muscular; more so

than females (Burgess et al., 2007; Dill & Thill, 2007; Scharrer, 2004). For instance, Scharrer (2004) rated characters that appeared in video game advertisements on attractiveness and muscularity on a scale of 1 to 5; results indicated that male characters were more muscular but less attractive than female characters.

Another content analysis of video game magazines found that 85% of male characters scored above the mid-point on scales of muscular and powerfulness, indicating that most characters appear powerful and muscular (Miller & Summers, 2007). In addition, the vast majority (84%) of male characters had some sort of weapon, with 58% having a gun (Miller & Summers).

Finally, Dill and Thill (2007) categorized video game characters appearing in video game magazines. They scored characters as to whether or not they were hypermasculine, sexualized, and aggressive using a yes/no coding for each variable. They found that male characters are often (32.5%) portrayed as both hypermasculine and aggressive and 39.2% were both hypermasculine and sexualized. While these studies indicate that male video game characters tend to be portrayed as very masculine, studies have yet to examine the portrayal of male video game characters over time in order to determine if this was always the case.

EVOLUTION OF VIDEO GAMES

There are several reasons why games may have changed over time. While the above analyses indicate that male characters are quite muscular and powerful, this might not have always been the case. It is likely that characters' portrayals have gotten more extreme because of technological advances and the demands of consumers. Technological advancements have allowed game manufacturers to produce games that are more complex and detailed (Carnagey & Anderson, 2004; Gentile & Anderson, 2003). The first console video games, appearing in the early 1980s, were much less sophisticated than those of modern times. Advances in technology have allowed games to become so realistic that it is sometimes hard to tell whether it is a real image or a computer generated image. This allows for more graphic violence and realistic looking characters; thus, games likely have gotten more "extreme" in their character portrayals over the years.

Manufacturers may also be making more extreme games because consumers demand it. Excitation transfer theory (Zillman, 1983) predicts that players initially are aroused when playing a certain game—essentially games can exaggerate a player's emotions. However, this excitement wanes and players become desensitized after playing the game for a period of time. Thus, players seek more extreme games (e.g., more violent games) to maintain the elevated excitement level. While this does not apply to players who have never played a video game before, the market of 'new' players is quite small, given that one can only be 'new' for a brief period of time. The majority of players are experienced and likely seeking

“new and different” games—which may translate to seeking more extreme games. Because this is the manufacturers’ prime market, manufacturers likely cater to this desire.

For these reasons, games have likely changed. For instance, early games (e.g., released in 1988) might portray a character as a relatively “normal” person or animal. This may have been very novel and interesting for a player, as games themselves were new. As technology progressed and game designers sought new themes for games, the characters themselves had to change in order to keep the interest of players. Game designers might have decided that the “normal” characters should become more masculine (e.g., powerful) and have extraordinary powers and abilities. Simply put, players do not want to play “the same old game;” they want something new and different. Similarly, making games more realistic is one possible way of making games more engaging. Perhaps early games like Pac-Man were engaging for players, as it was novel to play a game in which one controls a circle-shaped character eating dots in a maze. However, it is possible that characters got more realistic (e.g., more human-like and life-like violence) in order to make the games more interesting and complex. Making games and characters more extreme and realistic is one way to create something different. This study will test this speculation.

If games are becoming more extreme and realistic, this could be concerning because it could mean that players are emulating more and more extreme characters. The impact of increased realism has been documented with multiple media types, including video games. A study examining television characters found that the more realistic a player perceived the television violence to be, the more aggressive behavior they demonstrated (Huesmann et al., 2003). Further, research specifically focusing on video games has found that players respond differently to more technologically advanced (i.e., more realistic) games. Technologically advanced games are more likely to increase player’s sense of presence and involvement in the game and their arousal, both physiological and reported (Ivory & Kalyanaraman, 2007).

In sum, there is reason to believe that games have changed over the years. More specifically, characters have likely become more realistic and extreme (e.g., more violent). The current study will attempt to determine whether this is the case.

OVERVIEW OF STUDY

As the studies just described suggest, male video game characters are often portrayed as ultra masculine and powerful. Advances in technology might mean these characters are becoming increasingly realistic in their abilities and behaviors as well. Male players may view these characters and find it is unrealistic to accomplish these things, which may have negative implications for males’ aggressive attitudes, behaviors and self-perceptions. They may also model violent behavior, which has implications for domestic violence and the criminal justice system as a whole. As such, it is important to study the characters contained

in the video game magazines, and how these characters have changed over time. Such an analysis would indicate how the potential influence of games may have changed.

Researchers have studied the content of games and advertisements, but these studies are limited in a number of ways. First, these studies did not measure changes over time, while the current study will assess 20 years worth of characters in gaming magazines in order to reveal trends (e.g., have male characters become more powerful?). To date, there is no study that specifically measures how male characters have changed over time.

Second, some of the content analyses discussed above only analyzed brief game play. This is a limitation because not all characters are likely to appear in those 15 (or so) minutes. In addition, characters in many recent games (e.g., *Fable*) change as game play progresses; thus, playing the first 15 minutes of a game would not reveal the appearance of the hero at the end of the game. In contrast, magazine articles often show a variety of characters that appear at all stages of game. For example, playing 15 minutes of a game would not enable the researchers to analyze the “boss” (i.e., enemy) the main character fights at the end of the game; however, the magazine might have a picture of the boss. The current analysis thus has the potential to provide a more complete analysis of a greater number of male characters.

Next, past studies have largely focused on games or advertisements and on not magazine articles and text. While Scharrer (2004) looked at advertisements in magazines, these ads were one (60%) or two pages (33%), and contained little text. In contrast, many articles included in this analysis were lengthy, with the average article being nearly 6 pages in length and containing an average of 5.7 magazine columns of text. The current study assesses magazine articles which describe (in text) the abilities and goals of characters and contain more photographs of additional characters. Text provides additional data above just pictures because it can describe weapons and abilities that are not featured in pictures. It is possible that previous studies may have missed important findings due to limited information presented in advertisements or brief game play that is available in the lengthier, more detailed articles and text (e.g., advertisements would not likely have detailed text descriptions about goals or abilities of the characters).

Finally, the current analysis contains more dependent variables than past studies, with the intention of providing a more detailed picture of how characters appear and have changed over time. The current study not only examines traits such as muscular and powerful, it also examines the portrayal of the character as attractive, happy, mad, innocent, afraid and helpless. Additionally, the current analysis examines characters’ powers and weapons in order to determine whether realistic abilities and weapons (e.g., guns) are more common in recent magazines than unrealistic ones (e.g., magic). The analysis will determine whether such traits (i.e., dependent variables) vary according to the time period in which the magazine was published (i.e., independent variable); this will determine whether characters have changed over time.

The current research seeks to fill these gaps by investigating how male video game

characters in magazines have changed over a 20-year span. Specifically, the study will focus on the portrayal of masculinity and changing realism of the character by examining changes in appearance (e.g., realism, muscular) as well as changes in abilities and weapons.

Hypotheses

With changes in technology and consumer demand, game makers have the capability and motivation to make characters more complicated and detailed (e.g., more muscular, more skills, more powerful weapons). As discussed above, games have likely gotten more extreme (e.g., containing more violence and sexuality), which should be reflected in changes in characters' appearances (e.g., characters appear more violent and sexy). There is, however, no statistical test of this observation until now. Thus, it is predicted that games have changed significantly in their portrayal of men.

Specifically, *hypothesis one* predicts that characters will change in masculinity over time. Hypothesis 1a predicts an increase in "masculine" characteristics (e.g., being more muscular, powerful, sexy, and attractive) over time. This study also measures changes in masculine traits that have not previously been measured in prior studies (e.g., mad, happy, carefree, innocent, helpless). As noted by Scharrer (2004), hypermasculinity is characterized by the presence of traits related to physicality, aggression, anti-social behavior and danger. In addition, it is characterized by the dislike of traits demonstrating weakness, empathy or compassion. Thus, the general prediction for hypothesis 1 is that recent characters will have more of these masculine traits than older characters.

Hypothesis 1b expects that the absolute values of traits of the most recent characters will be quite extreme. That is, men are expected to be quite hypermasculine (Scharrer, 2004). It is predicted that being mad and NOT being happy, carefree, innocent and helpless are related to being masculine. Although these new variables have yet to be studied, it is predicted that a masculine character will not be happy, afraid, or carefree (e.g., if he is being violent or doing dangerous acts). Masculine characters are also not likely to be innocent or helpless (e.g., if characters are successful in these acts of violence or other anti-social acts).

Hypothesis two predicts that there will be changes in realism relating to the characters over time. As discussed above, realism is one way of making games more engaging for players; thus, game designers may make games more realistic in order to entice players. Whether something is "realistic" refers essentially to whether it exists in the real world. For example, flying could be considered unrealistic, whereas fighting could be considered a realistic ability. This is "realistic" because humans cannot realistically fly (without mechanical help), but they can realistically fight.

Hypothesis 2a predicts that characters will become more real (e.g., human as opposed

to non-human). Hypothesis 2b predicts that older characters will be more likely to have unrealistic powers and weapons (e.g., magic), while newer characters would be more likely to have the ability to use more realistic powers and weapons (i.e., weapons).

METHOD

Sampling

The three American magazines selected for analysis were the official magazines for the Xbox, Playstation, and Nintendo consoles. Magazines were published from 1988-2007, beginning with the first issue of *Nintendo Power* ever published. We went all the way back to 1988 in order to get a complete picture of how games have changed since the first official magazine associated with a console was released. Thus, the analysis contains the first official gaming magazine ever made. We chose magazines associated with the three consoles up until 2007, which was the year the data was collected. Thus, the study uses magazines from the first 20 years in which official gaming magazines existed. These magazines offer descriptions of the games, including pictures of the characters and text describing the character's goals and tasks. Although not a complete representation of the entire game, this study is interested in the representation of the characters in the magazines.

The selection criteria for inclusion in the study were that the article must have visible male characters to code (i.e., some image of the character) and must include a reasonable amount of text (i.e., a minimum of half-page of text). Articles with less text or articles about games that did not include male characters were not selected. All articles within the magazine that met the criteria were coded. The article length and image requirement ensured that there was little missing data. Coders chose the main male characters (determined by text or the frequency of pictures of the character) and another character from each game; if this was not possible, two male characters were chosen randomly from each game.

Because a 20-year longitudinal analysis would be quite cumbersome, games were grouped in four-year time periods: 1988-1991, 1992-1995, 1996-1999, 2000-2003, 2004-2007 (all 20 years are included in the analysis, however they are grouped into these specified groups). Sixty characters were randomly chosen from each time period, resulting in a final sample of 300 male characters. A large sample of games from each time period helped ensure that a broader variety of characters were included. While *Nintendo Power* issued its first magazine in 1988, *Playstation* was not available until 1997 and *Xbox* was not available until 2002. Thus, not every time period contained games from each magazine. This is an unfortunate but uncontrollable limitation of the study (i.e., it is impossible to analyze characters that did not exist). Thus, *Nintendo Power* characters are over-represented in the sample, simply because it was the only one of the official magazines available at the time (and the *Nintendo* console was the only one of the three consoles that existed at that time).

Coding

Coders were four females and two males; three were undergraduate students (ages 19 to 22), two were graduate students (ages 24 and 27), and one was a professor (age 32). Five coders were white and one was a racial minority. The variables for the codebook were chosen either because they were used in a past study, because they seemed to fit the definition of “hypermasculinity” (Scharrer, 2004), or because an anecdotal review of articles indicated that the variable would be useful for the study’s purposes. When a wide range of variables had been established, the codebook was designed, including examples of items that might be considered ambiguous (e.g., sexiness). These variables were operationlized into two categories, relating to masculinity and realism.

Masculinity. Masculinity was operationalized based on prior research examining hypermasculinity (e.g., Scharrer, 2004). Typical masculine characteristics, such as powerful, danger-seeking, anti-social, unsympathetic, successful, and muscular were believed to be descriptive of a masculine character. Further, as research indicated that muscular males were more likely to be romantic interests (Morrison & Halton, 2009), the variables sexy and attractive were also added to the construct, so that masculine characters were defined as exhibiting traits such as muscular, powerful, sexy, and attractive. For items describing potential masculine characteristics of the characters, coders were instructed to rate the character (on an 8 point scale) based on how a typical person might view them and were given some definitions. For example, coders rated each character between zero and seven on the variable “muscular,” with zero meaning little or no muscle tone and seven meaning extreme or exaggerated muscle tone. Coders also used the scale to rate characters on traits such as innocent (e.g., sweet and caring, law abiding), helpless (e.g., being a prisoner, not able to help others or self), mad (e.g., frowning, trying to hurt someone, angry appearance), happy (e.g., smiling), afraid (e.g., fearful appearance, screaming) and carefree (e.g., not in danger, seemingly unworried).

Realism of abilities and weapons. Coders marked characters as human or non-human, and noted the presence or absence of varying abilities (i.e., use of magic, flying, super speed) and weapons (i.e., guns, tanks, knives). Thus, the coding was not particularly subjective (i.e., a knife was either present or not present).

All researchers practiced coding until the project leader was confident that coding styles were similar. Articles were then divided among researchers so that each time period was coded by multiple researchers to prevent any bias that might result from one researcher coding all articles in a time period.

Interrater Reliability

To ensure all coders were coding similarly, the lead researcher performed an interrater reliability check. Ten percent of the articles were chosen, including some from each time period, and each were coded by two coders. Researchers were considered to agree if their responses were exact or only varied by one unit on a 0 to 7 scale (e.g., a “6” and a “7” was an “agree” but a “5” and a “7” was a “disagree.”). The average agreement was high for all variables (80-100%), with exception of one, which was dropped from the analysis because of low interrater reliability (less than 80% agreement). This reliability is quite high even considering the “chance” that two coders would coincidentally pick the same number on the 8 point scale.

RESULTS

ANOVAs and Tukey’s post-hoc tests were used for continuous dependent variables, using the five time periods as an independent variable. Pearson’s Chi-Square was used for categorical data. The unit of analysis was the character, as depicted in pictures and text.

Hypothesis One: Masculinity

The first hypothesis predicted that characters would change in masculinity over time. For instance, they were expected to appear more muscular and sexy, and to appear less innocent and carefree. In order to test hypothesis 1a, coders rated characters on a variety of factors concerning appearance, using a scale from 0 (not at all) to 7 (extremely). As predicted, characters’ appearance changed significantly over time; for each variable, the earliest time period was significantly different from the most recent time period. General patterns of means are discussed here; means and post-hoc differences are displayed in Table 1. In general, characters in more recent time periods were more muscular ($F(4, 282) = 9.86, p < .0001$), attractive ($F(4, 273) = 8.28, p < .0001$), sexy ($F(4, 276) = 4.38, p = .002$), powerful ($F(4, 272) = 3.88, p < .001$) and mad ($F(4, 282) = 4.0, p = .004$). On the other hand, characters became generally less happy ($F(4, 274) = 3.61, p = .007$), carefree ($F(4, 271) = 3.35, p = .01$), and innocent ($F(4, 268) = 3.33, p = .01$) over time. There was no significant difference over time for the characteristics of helpless or afraid.

In addition to changes over time, absolute values of traits are also of interest in revealing the degree of masculinity characters display. Hypothesis 1b was confirmed, as current characters (i.e., from the 2004-2007 time period) averaged 4.62 on the muscular item, 5.23 on the powerful item, and 3.49 on the attractive item. These measures are about or

Table 1: Differences in Characters' Dress and Appearance by Time Period

Dependent Variable	<u>Time Period</u>				
	1988-91	1992-95	1996-99	2000-2003	2004-07
Muscular	2.56 ^{ab}	3.03 ^{cd}	4.38 ^{ace}	3.12 ^{ef}	4.62 ^{bdf}
Sexy	.74 ^a	.76 ^b	1.63	1.14	1.82 ^{ab}
Attractive	1.76 ^a	1.51 ^{bc}	2.62 ^b	2.40 ^d	3.49 ^{acd}
Powerful	3.27 ^a	3.62	4.15	4.32	5.23 ^a
Mad	1.69 ^a	1.82 ^b	2.08	2.76	3.04 ^{ab}
Happy	1.84 ^a	1.19	1.25	0.91	0.50 ^a
Carefree	1.21 ^a	1.12	0.97	0.53	0.28 ^a
Innocent	1.23 ^a	0.71	0.51	0.51	0.24 ^a

Note. Within each variable (row), means that have no superscripts in common are not significantly different from each other (Tukey's HSD, $p < .05$).

above the half way mark on the 0-7 scale, indicating that current game characters are likely to possess these traits, at least at a moderate level. In contrast, current characters averaged .28 on the carefree item, .24 on the innocent item, and .5 on the happy item and .037 on the helpless item. As such, male players who identify with characters may interpret this to mean that they (and men in general) should look muscular, powerful and attractive, but not carefree, innocent, happy or helpless.

Hypothesis Two: Realism

The second hypothesis predicted that there would be changes in the characters' weapons and abilities over time. As predicted by hypothesis 2a, characters became more likely to be a human as time progressed ($X^2(4) = 42.75, p < .0001$). Specifically, in the first time period, only 21.7% of characters were humans. This number increased steadily every year (see Table 2). In the final time period, 70% were men or women.

Hypothesis 2b specified that older characters would be more likely to have unrealistic powers (e.g., magic), while newer characters would be more likely to use weapons. As predicted, older characters were more likely to be able to become invisible ($X^2(4) = 14.2, p = .007$), fly or use super speed ($X^2(4) = 13.8, p = .008$), or use magic ($X^2(4) = 11.0, p = .027$). In contrast, newer characters were more likely to have weapons ($X^2(4) = 14.2, p = .007$). The use of martial arts ($X^2(4) = 15.5, p = .004$) also decreased over time, indicating a recent preference in weapons over physical combat. There was no difference in characters' abilities to swim or play sports, largely due to the infrequent nature of these abilities.

Hypothesis 2 also predicted that the weapons used in games would change over time. Specifically, more realistic weapons (e.g., guns) would be more frequent in more recent time

Table 2: Main Character Realism of Identity, Abilities and Weapons

Dependent Variable		1988-91	1992-95	1996-99	2000-03	2004-2007
Human						
Yes	13	16	31	36	42	
Percent	21.7%	26.7%	51.7%	60.0%	70.0%	
Become invisible						
Yes	1	6	2	0	0	
Percent	1.7%	10%	10.2%	0%	0%	
Martial Arts						
Yes	13	24	16	13	6	
Percent	21.7%	40.0%	26.7%	21.7%	10.0%	
Magic						
Yes	14	12	9	8	2	
Percent	23.3%	20.0%	15%	13.3%	3.3%	
Use Weapons						
Yes	40	29	30	38	46	
Percent	66.7%	48.3%	50.0%	63.3%	76.7%	
Fly or Super Speed						
Yes	9	15	9	5	2	
Percent	15.0%	25.0%	15.5%	8.3%	3.3%	
Use a gun						
Yes	16	13	21	24	35	
Percent	26.7%	21.7%	35.0%	40.0%	58.3%	
Military weapons						
Yes	2	5	8	10	12	
Percent	3.3%	8.3%	13.3%	16.7%	20.0%	
Magic Spell						
Yes	12	6	8	8	2	
Percent	20.0%	10%	13.3%	13.3%	3.3%	

periods, while less realistic weapons (e.g., magic spells, throwing rocks, throwing fire) would become less frequent. Indeed, newer characters were more likely to use a gun ($X^2(4) = 21.1, p < .0001$) or military weapon (e.g., tank or grenade; $X^2(4) = 9.74, p < .05$) compared to older characters. Meanwhile, older characters were more likely to use magic spells (though only marginally significant difference; $X^2(4) = 8.33, p = .08$). There were no

differences in using a knife, fire, fighting, ice or bow and arrow. As analyses indicate, the game characters' abilities and weapons have changed over time. If the portrayal of these characters sends messages about what is expected of men, it could inadvertently communicate that men should be violent and aggressive and willing to use weapons.

DISCUSSION

The recent rise in the popularity of video games has led to an increased need to examine the content and resulting effects that these games might have on youth (Children and Watching TV, 2001; Anderson, Berkowitz, Donnerstein, Huesman, Johnson et al., 2003). Likewise, video game magazines have become common and could also impact consumers. If research is correct that games are influential on behavior, this has serious implications for players' behavior. This is particularly true if individuals are comparing themselves to the characters or emulating the characters' behavior.

As a whole, each hypothesis was generally supported, indicating that male video game characters have changed over time. Hypothesis one was confirmed. Characters in more recent time periods demonstrated greater positive masculine traits in that they were more attractive, muscular, sexy, mad and powerful. They were also less happy, innocent, and carefree. The most current characters also scored quite high on scales of masculinity (i.e., muscular, powerful and attractive), and low on scales measuring non-masculine traits (i.e., helpless, carefree). This indicates that current characters are portrayed as hypermasculine.

Hypothesis two was also confirmed; over time, characters and their abilities and weapons changed over time. More recent characters were more likely to be human and their abilities and weapons were more likely to be realistic. In older games, most abilities and weapons were unrealistic in nature (e.g., magic, flying or super speed or becoming invisible). Largely, the abilities in older games provided a less gruesome or violent way of injuring an opponent. More recent games contained more "realistic" forms of violence, often involving guns or other weapons.

These findings have many implications for men and the people they interact with every day. Recent games are more likely to have human characters rather than non-human characters, making it easier for players to identify with the characters. These characters may convey norms of behavior and attitudes, demonstrating that men should not be innocent or happy but should be attractive, muscular and powerful. They may also demonstrate that males should have violent tendencies and be able to use weapons. It is also somewhat concerning that there were changes over time, specifically that characters are becoming more masculine. Hypermasculine characters may influence players who wish to become more like the men they see on the game. As previous media research indicates, this can be detrimental to body esteem (Barlett et al., 2005) and may actually encourage dangerous behaviors, such

as use of steroids (Morrison et al., 2004) to attain an “ideal” masculinity.

Further, the analysis confirms that the presence of realistic and violent abilities and weapons is increasing. This might communicate that men are supposed to be violent creatures that frequently use guns to solve problems. If youth emulate the characters’ behaviors, they might believe that this is a viable option to solve their own problems, possibly leading to violence in relationships and other crimes. Research indicates that there is a link between violent video game content and aggressive thoughts and attitudes (Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Sherry, 2001). The realism depicted within the game may further enhance this effect, as realism has already been demonstrated to have a more profound impact players in terms of involvement and arousal levels (Ivory & Kalyanaraman, 2007). That is, as technology increases, it makes characters more real to the player, which can make them easier to identify with and emulate.

Limitations

There are several limitations that should be addressed. First, the samples from each time period do not contain the same number of games from each magazine; older time periods only contained Nintendo Power articles, because Playstation and Xbox had not been invented yet. This might be problematic because Nintendo is targeted toward a more general (and perhaps younger) audience. This might mean more kid-friendly characters appear in early years than in later years, when Nintendo is not as great of a proportion of the sample. However, the sample used here is a good representation of the magazines that existed in each time period. Simply put, the universe of gaming magazines has changed, and the samples here reflect the universe of games. Thus, this article concludes that “games have changed over time,” however one must realize that “games” refers to different magazines at different periods (e.g., refers only to the one magazine that existed in 1988, but refers to all three magazines that existed in 2007).

Second, this was not a random sampling of magazines. Researchers attempted to get all magazines ever published, but back issues were often difficult to find. It is possible that the few issues we were unable to acquire contained games that were somehow unique. However, there is no reason to suspect that this is the case. Another concern is that the researchers only looked at the official magazines for each of the gaming consoles. Magazines which portray only computer games and unofficial magazines were not included in the analysis.

Finally, there was limited diversity in the coders. Coders ranged in age from 19 to 32, one third were female, and more than 80% were Caucasian. Age, gender, and race might influence perceptions and create a bias in coding. Ideally, a more diverse sample of coders would be appropriate to ensure that responses were limited in their biases. As it was, the use of interrater reliability was meant to ensure profound bias did not occur.

Conclusions

The research on media influences has demonstrated that various types of media can impact an individual's self perception (Bessenoff, 2006; Morrison et al., 2004). It is entirely possible that games (and their corresponding magazines) could have the same impact, particularly if their content is such that it sets unrealistic standards or models dangerous behavior. As such, it is of great interest to study the characters depicted in these games. Few studies have sufficiently investigated the content of games in relation to men's appearance and abilities, particularly as they have changed over time.

Games have changed in content, making them important to assess. In the early days of Nintendo, Mario defeated his enemies by jumping on their head or throwing turtle shells at them. Now, characters are more advanced. They have an entire artillery at their disposal, and can choose to execute enemies with sniper rifles or grenades, causing realistic carnage. If players wish to have characteristics similar to their favorite game characters (McDonald & Kim, 2001) and experience "wishful identification" with characters (Konijn et al., 2007), then youth may emulate their behaviors and attitudes, assuming that violence is an acceptable and possibly even a required behavior for men.

The current study offers a stepping stone for future research. Because male characters have become increasing masculine and more likely to use weapons, it is important to examine how this may impact youth. While some research has examined the influence of games on aggression, future research should more fully focus on the impact of unrealistically masculine characters on maladaptive behavior (e.g., steroid use), self esteem and body image.

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THE EFFECTS OF INTEREST GROUP ADVERTISING AND PARTISAN STEREOTYPING ON CANDIDATE RACES: IS SAME-SEX MARRIAGE THE DEFINING CIVIL RIGHTS ISSUE OF THE NEW MILLENNIUM?

DAVID L. PAINTER, JULIANA FERNANDES AND MARIDITH A. DUNTON MILES

Interest group-sponsored ballot proposition campaigns have become a significant source of political information for more than 70% of American voters during election cycles. An analysis of voting results and television market ad-buy data suggest that interest group advertising may also significantly impact voting behavior and electoral outcomes. This study used an experimental design to test the agenda-setting effect of an interest group advertisement sponsoring a state marriage protection amendment and explored the interaction effects on candidate evaluation among participants' political party affiliations, use of partisan stereotyping, and stance on social issues. The results indicate that interest group campaign advertising has a significant agenda-setting effect and that participants' use of partisan stereotyping polarizes candidate evaluations. Contrary to popular claims, the results also suggest that the issue of abortion rights continues to have more impact on candidate evaluations than does same-sex marriage.

Keywords: ballot proposition, advertising, agenda-setting, partisan stereotype, candidate evaluation

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After extensive interest group campaigns in 29 states between 1993 and 2009, voters approved amendments to their state constitutions defining marriage as the legal union between one man and one woman. Scholars and journalists alike claim these campaigns have increased the saliency of same-sex marriage to the extent that “it has surpassed other major social issues like abortion in its influence on voters” (Pew, 2004, p. 1). During the 2008 election, for instance, conservatives from across the country “felt more urgency about stopping same-sex marriage than about abortion” and their victories in doing so “came on a core issue that has defined their engagement in politics over the past decade” (McKinley & Goodstein, 2008, p. 2). Since the battle over homosexual’s civil rights promises to endure and attitudes on this issue are divided upon distinctly generational lines, the issue of same-sex marriage has also been characterized as the defining social issue of the millennial generation (Martin, 2010).

While most people are probably more concerned with the practical aspects of their everyday lives than with the ever-changing “carnival of personalities, issues, and events that, moment to moment, comprise the political realm” (Kinder, 1998, p. 168), interest group campaign activities have become a major source of political information during electoral contests for more than 70% of American voters (Lupia, 1994; Matsusaka, 2004). Indeed, the amount of money spent by these campaigns rivals that of candidate races. For example, the twelve most extensive interest group campaigns in 2006 spent more than \$329 million across seven states, and interest group campaign spending in just four states (California, Florida, Michigan, and Oregon) topped \$338 million in 2004 (Ballot Strategy Center, 2008).

Although ballot proposition and candidate elections continue to occur simultaneously across more than half the states, the effects of the former on voters’ political information processing related to the latter have only been minimally explored. Using both interest group and candidate televised campaign advertisements as stimuli in an experimental design, the purpose of this study is to: (1) test the agenda-setting effects of interest group campaign advertisements; (2) investigate the effects of these campaign messages on young citizens’ political information processing related to candidate races; and (3) explore the status of same-sex marriage as the cleavage defining social issue for the millennial generation.

Theoretically, a strong case can be made that voters act as cognitive misers when processing information from all types of televised political advertising. As such, the effects of exposure to advertisements sponsoring relatively unknown candidates and highly salient, enduring (or easy) issues should interact with participants’ use of heuristic processing in the form of partisan stereotypes to polarize candidate evaluations (Carmines & Stimson, 1990; Haider-Markel & Meier, 1996; Layman & Stimson, 1997). While abortion rights have been cited as the social issue defining the partisan divide among the previous generation, recent arguments that battles over homosexuals’ civil rights better characterize the partisan cleavage on social issues among the millennial generation also warrants investigation.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Nearly one hundred years ago Walter Lippman (1922) explicated the process by which we construct over-simplified representations of the world outside to make sense of our complex political environment, and his theories about the mediatization of politics continue to inform our understanding of the media's political effects today (Rogers, 2004; Strömbäck & Esser, 2009). Following Lippmann's development of the stereotype model in political psychology, many other branches of the social sciences also underwent a paradigm shift away from the stimulus-response or behaviorism school of thought toward more detailed analysis of our cognitive maps and the effects of information on them. By the middle of the 20th century, much social science research focused on the interactions between the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of information and its effects on our attitudes and behavior. For instance, Bartlett (1932) examined the impact of information on internal memory structures and laid the groundwork for the development of schema theory and the results of Klapper's (1960) research pointed toward more limited effects of media messages.

In *Public Opinion*, Lippmann (1922) provided a mass society perspective on media effects when he argued that most people were too self-centered and focused on the mundane aspects of their daily life to devote much energy to the consumption, processing, and analysis of news and political information. To deal with this complex environment, he suggested that we construct pictures in our heads to populate our pseudo-environment of subjective, oversimplified political images. These stereotypes, then, act as organizing guides and heuristic shortcuts in our political information processing. Thus, while we may all live in the same world, we may think and feel about it in very different ways.

Since the information used to construct the pictures in our heads is provided by the media, Lippmann contended that this information also constructs our reality by establishing the basis upon which public opinion is formed. The impact of this mediatization of the news in regard to foreign affairs was analyzed by Cohen (1963) who first articulated the thesis of the agenda-setting function of the media when he stated that the media may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but they are "stunningly successful in telling people what to think about" (p.13). Cohen refined Lippmann's mass society perspective into a limited effects framework and established a basis upon which the agenda-setting hypothesis could be tested. McCombs and Shaw (1972) translated Cohen's comment into a prediction that topics emphasized by the amount and prominence of news media coverage would also be the topics people think are most important.

Cognitive Effects of Interest Group Advertising

At present, television advertising remains the dominant form of communication between candidates and voters in both national and most state-wide elections despite continuing advances in communication technologies and the Internet (Hindman 2009; Kaid, Fernandes, & Painter 2011). The results of early investigations into the effects of televised political advertising evidenced that exposure to political spots may increase voters' issue knowledge and understanding of candidates' policy positions at stake in the election (Atkin & Heald, 1976; Hofstetter & Strand, 1983; Martinelli & Chaffee, 1995). There is also abundant research suggesting that televised political candidate advertising may influence the salience of issues at stake in the election by both the media and the public at large (Herrnson & Patterson, 2000; Kaid, 1976; Roberts & McCombs, 1994; Williams, Shapiro, & Cutbirth, 1983).

More specifically related to interest group campaigns, Donovan, Tolbert, & Smith (2008) conducted a content analysis of newspaper reports and Campbell and Monson (2008) analyzed direct mail efforts to verify that the saliency of same-sex marriage was greater in states with marriage protection amendment campaigns than in states without such campaigns. The results of these studies provide support for the notion that the issues raised by interest group campaigns are more salient in states allowing for these direct democracy measures. While there is only one previous investigation into the effects of interest group campaign advertising extant in the literature, the results suggest these ads may significantly impact voting behavior and electoral outcomes (Stratmann, 2006). Based on the results of these analyses, we propose an experimental test of the agenda-setting effects of exposure to interest group advertisements. Therefore, we predict:

- H1: Exposure to the interest group campaign advertisement will have an agenda-setting effect by increasing the saliency of marriage as an issue.

Lippmann (1922) argued that the media, by providing the information upon which public opinion is formed, affected politics in ways transcending the saliency of particular issues. More recently, social psychologists contend that increasing the saliency of an issue may make it more immediately accessible and therefore it may be applied to the interpretation of subsequent information — even in unrelated contexts (Kunda, 1999). In this manner, the agenda-setting effect of the media not only influences the salience of an issue, but it may also prime the issue as a criterion for evaluating candidates (Weaver, Graber, McCombs, & Eyal, 1981; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). While this agenda-setting effect referred to as priming does not result in attitude change or persuasion per se, it may “alter the weight voters assign to issues through varying the salience of considerations” (Nicholson, 2005, p. 19). Therefore, we inquire:

RQ1: What are the effects of exposure to the interest group campaign advertisement on candidate evaluation?

Partisan Stereotype Effects

In addition to exploring the agenda-setting effects of televised interest group campaign advertisements, this investigation also attempts to analyze how information provided in these spot ads interacts with participants' pre-existing knowledge structures to impact their evaluations of an unknown candidate. There is compelling evidence that long-standing memory structures such as partisan stereotypes may affect candidate evaluations (Lodge & Hamill, 1986) and this effect appears to be especially powerful in low information races (Koch, 2001). These effects are dependent, however, on both the content and accuracy of the generalization as well as the receiver's perception of group membership and existing ideological orientation.

As with generalizations formed about other social categories, partisan stereotypes may affect candidate evaluation based on whether the receiver perceives mutual membership in a political party. Working much like ethnocentrism, those who perceive themselves as members of the same political party (in-group) will evaluate the candidate more positively than those who perceive themselves as members of a different political party (out-group) than the candidate (Judd & Downing 1995, p. 66). Therefore, those who perceive themselves to be members of the same political party as the candidate and ascribe the issue position to the partisan stereotype are expected to evaluate the candidate more positively than those who perceive themselves to be members of a different political party and ascribe the candidate's issue position to the partisan stereotype (Kuklinski & Hurley, 1994). Consistent with the social psychological model of partisanship, the extent of partisan stereotype effects may also depend on the saliency of the message (Arceneaux, 2008) and televised political advertising appears to magnify its effects (Rahn & Cramer, 1996).

Although Lippman's early work on stereotypes stimulated a great deal of research among social psychologists, he characterized this type of processing in categorically negative terms; arguing they were "illogically derived from observation, held rigidly, and erroneous in content" (Judd & Downing 1995, p. 65). Around the mid-1950s, however, researchers began to redefine stereotypes as "probabilistic generalizations about a group or class of people, no more illogical or erroneous than generalizations about any other sort of category that perceivers might find useful" (p. 66). That is, much like object categories, stereotypes are social taxonomies defined by specific attributes typical and characteristic of group members.

The rationale behind voters' use of partisan stereotypes is predicated on the notion that most citizens lack the motivation to pay close attention to politics, so they rely on heuristic cues to inform their attitudes. When exposed to campaign messages, for instance, these cues

may allow voters to categorize issues and candidates according to existing stereotypes held about particular pieces of information contained in a campaign message. Whether based on ideology or broader issue orientations, the candidate's political party affiliation, or some other aspect of the message, voters use generalizations to save time and energy. According to this view, voters act as cognitive misers who may be largely uninformed about many aspects of an issue or a candidate, but are able to generalize based on the cues provided in a message to make decisions (Lupia, 1994; Taber & Steenbergen, 1995). Although these decisions may not always be based on the specific candidate's issue position and may not always be in line with all of a voter's interests, errors in judgment are tolerated as the price of efficient operation in a highly complex and mediatised political environment.

When evaluating candidates, voters may experience uncertainty when knowledge about a candidate's issue positions is limited, so they may use partisan stereotypes to assign the candidate's position on important issues as a reference point. Defined as "cognitive structures that contain citizens' knowledge, beliefs, and expectancies about the two political parties" (Rahn, 1993, p. 474), appropriate use of these partisan stereotypes is predicated upon assignment of the candidate to the correct political party. Once information that cues this partisan assignment is processed, the candidate's position on a wide range of issues may be ascribed by the individual based on the stance assumed by the stereotype heuristic. Thus, the status of same-sex marriage in relation to abortion rights as the cleavage defining issue for the millennial generation may also be assessed by examining the relationship between these two policies and candidate evaluations.

Therefore, we pose:

RQ2: To what extent is the candidate's political party affiliation identified correctly?

RQ3: To what extent is the candidate's position on same-sex marriage ascribed to the stereotypical Republican Party position relative to abortion rights and health care reform?

H2: Partisan stereotyping and participants' political party affiliation will interact to polarize candidate evaluation.

RQ4: Has same-sex marriage surpassed abortion rights as the cleavage-defining social issue for Millennials?

METHOD

Participants

One-hundred and forty-one volunteer students were recruited from undergraduate classes fulfilling general education requirements in a Journalism and Communications college at a large southeastern research institution. Students were chosen as participants for particular reasons. First, meta-analysis results show there are no significant differences between student and non-student samples when investigating the agenda-setting effects of televised political advertising (Benoit, Leshner, & Chattopadhyay, 2007). Second, since the goal of this experimental investigation is to test theories about the effects of televised political campaign advertisements on individual's issue agendas and candidate evaluations, the objective is not merely to extrapolate the results to a broader population, but also to test the validity of some long-standing notions about the manner in which political information is processed and relatively unknown candidates are evaluated. Third, this study specifically attempts to investigate the impact of emerging issues on candidate evaluations and voting intentions, thus college students are the ideal population from which to sample as they are more likely to participate in the political process than non-student members of the millennial generation.

Design

This study consisted of a 2 (presence or absence of ballot proposition advertisement) by 2 (partisan stereotype used or not used) between-subjects posttest-only design. The presence or absence of the ballot proposition ad was manipulated between-subjects. The dichotomous partisan stereotype variable was composed after participants completed the entire study. Partisan stereotype was measured by asking participants to indicate their perception of the candidate's position on same-sex marriage, abortion rights, and health care reform (i.e., candidate supports issue or candidate opposes issue). These issues were not addressed in the candidate advertisement, thus participants were forced to ascribe the candidate's position on each issue based on contextual information in the ad. Since the candidate in the advertisement was identified as a Republican (i.e., it is mentioned that the candidate is Republican at the end of the ad), an assumption that he was against same-sex marriage, abortion rights, and health care reform would indicate use of the partisan stereotype (independent) variable. Participants either indicated that the candidate opposed the issues (i.e., partisan stereotype was used) or supported the issues (i.e., partisan stereotype was not used). A dichotomous variable was then calculated to determine whether participants' used the partisan stereotype: participants who responded that the candidate

opposed all three issues were coded as “used the stereotype” and participants who responded that the candidate supported any of the three issues were coded as “did not use the stereotype.”

Stimuli

To reduce any political bias or previous knowledge of the candidate, it was determined that the candidate advertisement should originate from a distant state so that participants would be extremely unlikely to recognize the candidate and that it should also be candidate-positive without any mention of the opposition (Kaid, Chanslor, & Hovind, 1992). As previously indicated, the candidate selected also needed to be identified with the Republican Party in order to calculate the partisan stereotype variable. The advertisement selected, both for fulfilling these requirements as well as for its high production quality and aesthetic appeal, was from the Mark Kirk (R) campaign for Illinois’ open U.S. Senate seat. The results of a pretest revealed that, after exposure to the advertisement, 96.9% of the 96 undergraduate participants identified the candidate as Republican and 97.9% perceived the ad to be positive. This advertisement described Mark Kirk’s military experience and cued partisan stereotypes not only by mentioning his Republican Party affiliation, but also by emphasizing his support for tax cuts and his opposition to the economic stimulus package.

The interest group advertisement used in this experiment was selected for its high message rating and effectiveness in a study of the six most frequently aired televised campaign advertisements during Florida’s Amendment 2 campaign (Painter & Miles, 2010). This advertisement addresses Amendment 2 — a proposition on Florida’s 2008 ballot — which sought to protect marriage by making same-sex marriage illegal in Florida. The advertisement emphasizes traditional family values and is strongly in favor of the amendment.

Dependent Variables

The dependent variables in this study were candidate evaluation and importance of issues in the upcoming election. Evaluations of the candidate were measured using a feeling thermometer scale ranging from 0 (*cool*) to 100 (*warm*) like the one traditionally used by the National Election Studies to measure attitudes toward the candidates (Rosenstone, Kinder, Miller, & the National Election Studies, 1997; Kaid, 2004). Agenda setting effects were measured using (1) an open-ended question asking participants to list up to five of the most important issues in the upcoming election and (2) a close-ended item which asked participants to rate the importance of same-sex marriage on a 5-point scale. Finally,

demographic questions such as gender, age, ideology, party affiliation and ethnical background were included in the questionnaire.

Procedure

Upon arriving in the research laboratory, participants were given an informed consent form and asked to take a seat at a computer. Participants were informed they would be viewing some videos and then answering some questions. Participants were asked not to discuss the project upon leaving the experimental setting. They were then told to remove the cover on their computer screen and begin the experiment. Participants were randomly assigned by MediaLab software to one of two experimental conditions: (1) participants were exposed to the ballot proposition advertisement followed by the candidate advertisement; and (2) participants were only exposed to the candidate advertisement. All experimental instructions were provided on the computer screen to accommodate both experimental conditions in the laboratory at the same time. Following viewing of the video, all conditions were given the same questionnaire with the measurements described above. Upon completion, participants were thanked, debriefed, and dismissed.

RESULTS

Agenda-Setting Effects

To determine if the interest group campaign advertisement had an agenda-setting effect, we used both an open-ended question and an issue importance rating item. In line with the agenda-setting hypothesis, we predicted that participants exposed to both the interest group and candidate advertisements would be more likely than participants exposed to only the candidate advertisement to mention marriage issues as important in the upcoming election. The results of a chi-square test reveal significant differences between those who viewed the interest group ad and those who did not ($\chi^2(1) = 7.32, p = .009$, two-sided test). When the interest group ad was present, 64.8% of participants mentioned marriage issues, while when the ad was not present, 35.2% of participants mentioned marriage issues.

To substantiate this agenda-setting finding, we also asked participants to rank the importance of the issue of same-sex marriage on a 7-point scale. The results of a univariate analysis of variance reveal that those exposed to both the interest group and candidate ads ranked same-sex marriage as significantly more important than did participants who were only exposed to the candidate ad ($M_{Ad\ present} = 4.78, M_{Ad\ not\ present} = 4.24; F(1, 139) = 4.26, p < .05$). These results provide support for Hypothesis 1, confirming that the presence of the interest group advertisement may make the ballot proposition issue more salient. However,

the presence or absence of the initiative ad did not have any significant effects on candidate evaluation ($F < 1$) so this variable was dropped from subsequent analysis as the purpose of this investigation is to identify factors impacting evaluations of an unknown candidate after exposure to televised advertising.

Partisan Stereotype Effects

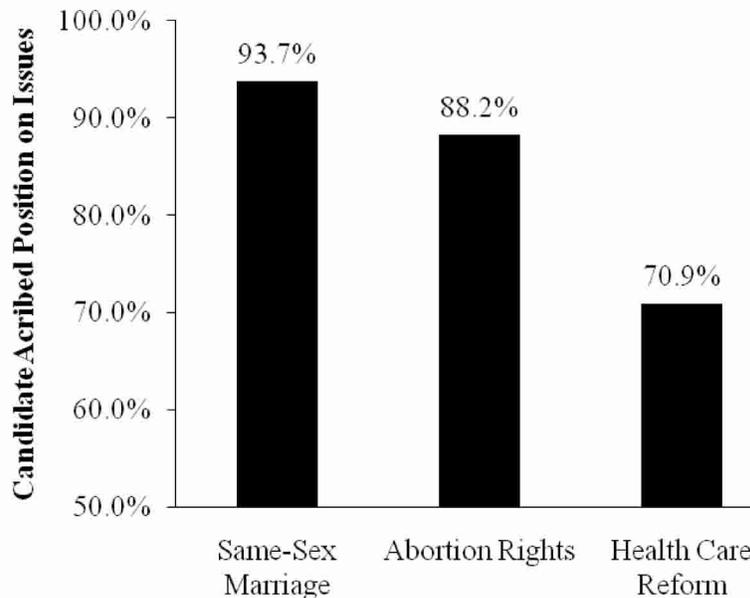
To investigate whether partisan stereotypes were used to evaluate the candidate, it is first necessary to determine if participants were able to accurately identify the candidate's political party affiliation after exposure to the advertisement. This determination is found in the answer to RQ2. Ninety percent of participants correctly identified the candidate's political party affiliation with the Republican Party after exposure to the candidate's advertisement. Based on this result, the analysis of RQ3 and H2 included only those participants who correctly identified the candidate's political party ($N = 127$).

Research Question 3 asked: To what extent was the candidate's position on same-sex marriage ascribed to the stereotypical Republican Party position relative to other salient and polarizing issues such as health care reform and abortion rights? As Figure 1 shows, the candidate's opposition to same-sex marriage (93.7%) is identified accurately significantly more often than his opposition to health care reform (70.9%, $z = 4.6$, $p = .000$), but not abortion rights (88.2%, $z = 1.311$, $p = 0.18$). Overall, the candidate's position on each of these issues was ascribed to the Republican stereotype significantly more frequently than would occur by chance, but participants were much more likely to use the stereotyped position for both the issues of same-sex marriage and abortion rights than they were for health care reform.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that partisan stereotype would interact with participant's political party affiliation to polarize candidate evaluation. Main effects of partisan stereotype ($F(1, 121) = 7.99$, $p < .05$) and party affiliation ($F(2, 121) = 6.53$, $p < .05$) were observed as well as an interaction of these two factors ($F(2, 121) = 5.66$, $p < .05$). Among participants who correctly identified the candidate as Republican but did not use partisan stereotypes, no significant differences in candidate evaluation were found independent of participants' party affiliation ($M_{\text{Dem}} = 71.70$, $M_{\text{Rep}} = 73.70$, $M_{\text{Ind}} = 74.53$; $F(2, 121) = 0.13$, $p > .10$). On the other hand, among participants who correctly identified the candidate as Republican and did use partisan stereotypes, there were significant differences in candidate evaluation by participant's political party affiliation. As predicted, Democrats and Independents (out groups) evaluated the candidate more negatively ($M_{\text{Dem}} = 54.65$, $M_{\text{Ind}} = 55.00$), while Republicans (in group) evaluated the candidate more positively ($M_{\text{Rep}} = 81.81$) ($F(2, 121) = 15.64$, $p < .001$).

A comparison of participants' political party affiliation and use of partisan stereotypes also reveals a polarization effect. As Figure 2 shows, participants affiliated with the

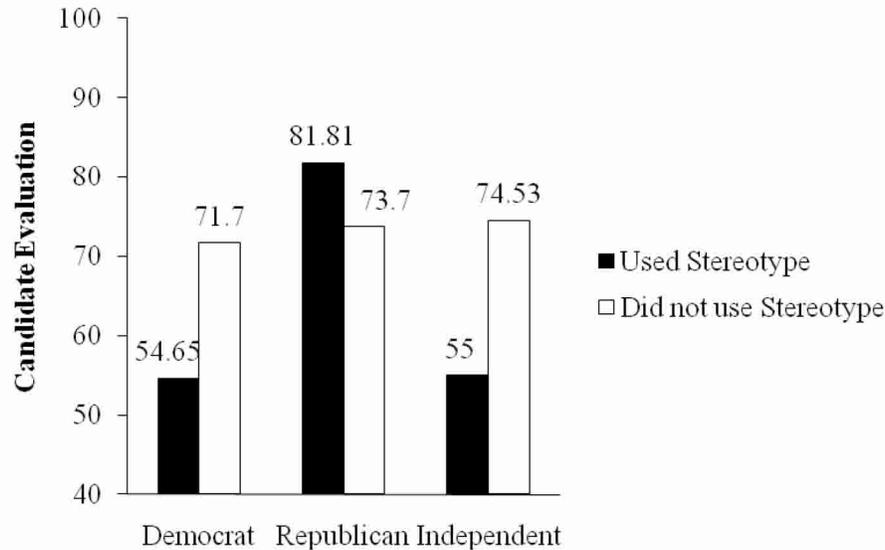
Figure 1. Candidate ascribed position on same-sex marriage relative to other issues.



Republican Party who used the partisan stereotype evaluated the candidate more positively ($M_{\text{used stereotype}} = 81.81$) than those who did not use the stereotype ($M_{\text{did not use stereotype}} = 73.70$), but this difference was not significant ($F(1, 121) = 1.36, p > .05$). Participants affiliated with the Democratic Party who used the partisan stereotype evaluated the candidate significantly more negatively ($M_{\text{used stereotype}} = 54.65$) than those who did not use the stereotype ($M_{\text{did not use stereotype}} = 71.70$) ($F(1, 121) = 14.68, p < .001$). Similar results were observed for participants who identified themselves as Independents ($M_{\text{used stereotype}} = 55.00, M_{\text{did not use stereotype}} = 74.53$; $F(1, 121) = 11.45, p < .05$). These results provide support for Hypothesis 2.

While these results show that use of the partisan stereotype polarizes candidate evaluations by interacting with the participants' political party affiliation, we also attempted to determine if same-sex marriage has surpassed abortion rights as the defining social issue for the millennial generation. Thus, to answer RQ4, we sought to determine if the correlation between the candidate's ascribed position on same-sex marriage and candidate evaluation was greater than the correlation between the candidate's ascribed position on abortion and candidate evaluation. Table 1 shows that there was no correlation ($r_{pb}(139) = .046, p > .05$) between the candidate's ascribed position on same-sex marriage and candidate evaluation. We also investigated the association between the candidate's ascribed position on same-sex marriage and candidate evaluation by participant's political party affiliation to ensure that Democratic and Republican participants' candidate evaluations were not off-setting each other and resulting in non-significant results. As Table 1 shows, however, the results of a

Figure 2. Influence of party affiliation and partisan stereotype on candidate evaluation.



point-biserial correlation test reveal there were no significant correlations among Democrats ($r_{pb}(69) = .029, p > .05$) nor Republicans ($r_{pb}(28) = -.149, p > .05$) between the candidate's ascribed position on same-sex marriage and candidate evaluation.

On the other hand, when we investigated the relationship between the candidate's ascribed position on abortion rights and participants' candidate evaluation, we did observe a significant correlation ($r_{pb}(139) = .198, p < .05$). Therefore, the candidate's position on abortion is still more important in terms of participants' evaluations than his position on same-sex marriage. As these results suggest, then, it appears that same-sex marriage has not surpassed abortion rights as the social issue defining the partisan cleavage for the millennial generation.

DISCUSSION

While exposure to a ballot proposition advertisement was shown in this study to raise the salience of the issue on the participants' agendas, it did not appear to directly affect candidate evaluation. It is for this reason that exploring the use of partisan stereotypes becomes important in explaining the differences observed in candidate evaluation. It has been argued that people are cognitive misers, using mental shortcuts to aid in making evaluations and decisions. In politics, these shortcuts have much to do with what each political party is about — i.e., where they stand on social and economic issues; which party

Table 1
Correlations¹ for Candidate Ascribed Position on Issue and Evaluation

	Same-Sex Marriage	Abortion Rights
Overall sample (N = 141) Candidate Evaluation	-.046 <i>p</i> = .588	-.198* <i>p</i> = .018
Democrat (<i>n</i> = 71) Candidate Evaluation	.029 <i>p</i> = .812	.083 <i>p</i> = .493
Republican (<i>n</i> = 30) Candidate Evaluation	-.149 <i>p</i> = .433	-.089 <i>p</i> = .641
Independent (<i>n</i> = 40) Candidate Evaluation	.203 <i>p</i> = .209	.500** <i>p</i> = .001

Notes: *Indicates a significant correlation at the 0.05 level. **Indicates a significant correlation at the 0.01 level. ¹Point biserial correlations were conducted to account for the type of variables involved in the analysis (categorical and continuous). For the categorical variables (position on same-sex marriage and abortion), a value of 0 was assigned when participants thought the candidate opposed the issue and a value of 1 was assigned when participants thought the candidate supported the issue.

will be stronger in tackling various problems; and at the simplest level, which party is preferred by the voter. The fact that we found wide use of stereotypes among our participants is somewhat surprising given that young voters are typically less partisan than their older cohorts. For Millennials, however, group membership appears to be an important cue to both self-identity and evaluation of others. These group memberships act as defining characteristics, and Millennials, as opposed to many previous generations, appear to have no difficulty describing themselves as religious or not, student or not, liberal or conservative, Democrat or Republican, along with a wide variety of other characteristics on their social media profiles. Millennials also came of age in a politically polarized nation — far more polarized than the political environment experienced by many earlier generations.

In line with previous research, then, it seems only natural that Millennials would make use of partisan stereotypes in an in-group/out-group fashion as shown in this study. As members of the in-group, Republican participants did not punish the candidate by significantly lowering his evaluation when they perceived he did not ascribe to the stereotyped partisan position on same-sex marriage. Democrats and Independents, however, when perceiving that the candidate deviated from the stereotyped position on same-sex marriage rewarded the out-group candidate with higher evaluations. Indeed, it was only when participant's ascribed the candidate's issue positions to the partisan stereotype that there were significant differences in evaluations by political party affiliation.

In addition to exploring the effects of interest group advertisements, this study also sought to test the status of same-sex marriage as the cleavage defining social issue for the millennial generation. Our results suggest that same-sex marriage has not surpassed abortion

rights as the cleavage defining social issue for Millennials. This finding is actually somewhat intuitive considering how the issue of same-sex marriage affects this population. In general, it appears that Millennials are not as concerned about a candidate's stance on this issue as they are about abortion rights. It is possible that issues related to marriage are less important to this generation and that they have yet to establish a presence on their political agendas. Further, the issue of abortion rights applies more readily to all citizens as it affects more people than same-sex marriage.

Millennials have never known a time when abortions were not legal and abortion rights were not actively debated, making it an easy issue in terms of its presence on the agenda and clearly defined partisan viewpoints. On the other hand, the debate over same-sex marriage has only become highly salient over the past five to ten years and continues to be less easily defined for citizens, candidates, and political parties. Finally, by framing this issue as marriage protection rather than marriage equality, interest groups sponsoring state constitutional bans on same-sex marriage have effectively framed the issue in their favor and their efforts may have led many citizens to dismiss the importance of the issue altogether. While we cannot claim that same-sex marriage has surpassed abortion as a defining issue in stereotyping political candidates, our results show statistically insignificant differences in participants' ability to assign stereotyped stances on these two issues. We believe this widespread use of stereotyped positions on the issue of same-sex marriage as well as the polarized evaluations resulting from the partisan stereotype effect suggests this issue is still evolving and that over time it may become more clearly defined for Millennials as well as other citizens.

Limitations and Future Research

One of the most commonly cited limitations of experimental research is its lack of external validity or the inability to extrapolate the results to a larger public due to the use of a non-representative sample. While this criticism certainly warrants concern, the purpose of this investigation was to test some long-standing theories about the effects of televised political advertising and candidate evaluation among young voters due to the distinct generational divide on the issue of same-sex marriage (Steinhauser, 2009). By showing that these notions are still valid among younger, less politically experienced voters, we provide evidence of their continued fruitfulness even when using stimuli from interest group campaigns that have seldom been investigated. Future studies using a more representative sample of voters, however, would also provide valuable evidence of the effects of interest group campaigns.

Future research into the effects of ballot measure advertising should make use of spots providing information meant to trigger partisan stereotypes as well as candidate advertisements that are contradictory to the stereotype. It would also be interesting to pit a

ballot proposition advertisement against a candidate spot (i.e. using a Democratic “owned” issue and a Republican candidate), instead of congruent advertisements as used in this study. Use of less salient and controversial ballot issues would also add an interesting component to the research in this field. Using a ballot proposition advertisement that involved an issue not salient on the national stage might provide some insight into the processes by which these interest group campaigns raise the salience of issues on the local and state level. Examining advertising in these discrete contests would allow further discrimination between the effects of national and local campaigns as well as introduce a new source of agenda-setting into races traditionally examined across the states. With more than 70% of Americans living in cities or states allowing for direct democracy measures, the influence of these campaigns simply can no longer be overlooked.

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'I WANT TO BE LIKE PEOPLE ON TV': EFFECT OF PERCEIVED REALISM, CHARACTER ADMIRATION AND FREQUENCY OF SITCOM AND REALITY TV VIEWING AMONG AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS

DAVID J. PARK AND MARIA ELENA VILLAR

Cultivation analysis suggests that viewing of television programming affects perceptions of reality, and the amount of viewing affects the nature of those perceptions. Moreover, the extent to which audiences perceive television content as an accurate depiction of reality makes these cultivation effects stronger. Research has also shown that while viewers understand that reality TV is scripted to an extent, heavy viewers are more likely to perceive these shows as more accurate depictions of reality. This study examines the relationship between frequency of sitcom and reality TV viewing, perceived realism of sitcoms and reality shows, and respondents' admiration for people on TV and their desire to imitate them, among a sample of largely African-American college students. The results establish that the admiration for characters and perceived realism of reality TV predicts the desire to imitate people on TV. Frequency of sitcom and reality TV viewing, and perceived realism of sitcoms, do not predict the desire to imitate people on TV. These findings are discussed in light of previous research on reality TV and young African-American audiences.

Keywords: perceived realism, African-Americans, reality tv, admiration, frequency

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The ways in which TV programs are perceived by viewers impact viewer perceptions and behavior. Leone, Peek & Bissell (2006) note that the more realistic television is perceived to be, the more likely it is that the content will influence viewers. Within this context, Shapiro and Lang (1991) indicate that viewers will be more likely to confuse TV content with memories of real world events, which can then impact real-world judgments and behavior resulting from cultivation processes. This is a concern especially when television shows can distort reality (Gerbner, Gross, M. Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980; Kooistra, Mahoney, & Westervelt, 1998; Woo & Dominick, 2001), influence racism (Davis & Gandy Jr, 1999; Entman, 1990, 1992) and desensitize human suffering while underestimating intricate social issues, especially among younger audiences (Brinson & Winn, 1997; Davis & Mares, 1998).

Television programming can also base human value by body shape and size (Skeggs, 2009), influence morals and values (Peysner, 2001), as well as influence viewers' beliefs that crime results from individual instead of structural influences (Cavender, 1998; Cavender & Bond-Maupin, 1993; Doyle, 1998; Oliver, 1994). Moreover, heavy viewers may also idealize marriage, see dating as a game, and believe that women are sexual objects and that men are sex-driven (Segrin & Nabi, 2002; Ward, 2002; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999). They may also support sexual acts in relationships with little commitment between partners (Taylor, 2005), or believe that sex should come earlier when dating (Aubrey, Harrison, Kramer, & Yellin, 2003).

However, not all of television's influences are considered negative. Calvert (2000) notes that reality TV programs can appeal to the human desire to discover truths and genuineness, while Cottle (2006) posits that reality TV can promote social integration. Obviously, not all behaviors are emulated or acted out in the real world by reality TV viewers (Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, & Smith, 2007).

Nonetheless, before being able to establish relationships with exposure to TV and behavior, perceptions of the realism of programming and attitudes of admiration for people on TV need to be measured, as they can moderate these relationships. With increased audience social interaction (Kjus, 2009) and the blurring between participant and observer (Curnutt, 2009) among reality TV programming compared to sitcom programming, studying beliefs about realism and admiration for people on TV in this relatively new context becomes more relevant than ever, especially among under-studied populations. Along these lines, this study examines differences between beliefs of perceived realism and attitudes of character admiration between reality TV and fictional (sitcom) programming among a sample of largely African-American college students. In this respect it is important to conduct research among African-American television audiences to determine if effects of perceived content are uniform among diverse populations and, ultimately, if African-Americans constitute an "interpretive community" (Barak, 1996; Condit, 1989; Fiske, 1986; Lindlof, 1988). Lindlof

(2002) defines an interpretive community as a group of people who share strategies for engaging, using, and interpreting communication about a media text or technology.

CONCEPTUALIZING REALITY TELEVISION AND SITCOMS

Reality TV emerged in the 1980s as a means of cost-cutting for Hollywood during a time when production costs were increasing, competition for advertising dollars was fierce, media were deregulated, and network debt was increasing (Carter, 2003; Raphael, 2004). While a typical scripted show can cost between \$1-2 million per prime-time hour, an hour of reality TV programming costs roughly \$700,000 to create (Rendon, 2004). The cost-cutting production model for reality TV is dependent on the hiring of non-union actors (Raphael, 2004; Screen Actors Guild, 2005), who are often referred to as “celetoids” (Rojek, 2001), “throwaway celebrities” (Ruddock, 2001), or “dispensable celebrities” (Collins, 2008).

Reality TV became one of the most popular television genres to emerge toward the end of the 21st century (Ferris et al., 2007) and is largely directed at young adults twenty-five years old and younger (Hill, 2005; Jubera, 2001). Academic definitions of reality TV have yet to coalesce into a unifying conceptual reference, with no consensus on an accepted definition. Nabi et al. (2003) suggest reality TV constitutes programming that entails real people being filmed as they experience events, either contrived or as they occur in their lives. Bratich (2006) notes that reality TV is “best conceived as a performative phenomenon that captures, modifies, reorganizes, and distributes powers of transformation” (p. 67). Here, the focus is on transformation, with an example of makeover shows in reality TV as support. Bratich (2006) also sees reality TV as a loosely-based mixture of situation comedy, game show techniques, and experiments where contestants often compete among each other or pull pranks. To differ with these perspectives, Dunkley (2001) sees reality TV as anything but real, and instead sees reality programming as largely artificial and contrived, while Corner (2002) suggests that reality TV should be perceived as a contradictory cultural environment where viewers and producers invest more in reality and fiction than in absolute truths and representational ethics.

The main differentiating characteristic of reality TV from sitcoms is likely that ordinary people are used instead of professional actors (Reiss & Wiltz, 2004). Biressi and Nunn (2005) suggest that this unique characteristic of having ordinary people participate on commercial TV programming erodes the distinction between performers and audiences. Moreover, reality TV is perceived to have an increased social interaction with its audience (Kjus, 2009), making the audience feel like participants in relatable - albeit staged - everyday situations. The viewer’s position as a spectator or ‘voyeur’ is the main appeal of reality shows, which can blur the distinctions between participant and observer (Curnutt, 2009).

Situational comedies or sitcoms were the result of the transition of comedy from the radio variety show to television (Taflinger, 1996). The term sitcom is short for situational comedy and was first coined by Variety (Variety, n.d.). Whereas reality TV shows often deliberately manufacture situations while monitoring participants' behavior to build on guided "outtake" moments, sitcoms are scripted. Since both sitcoms and most reality shows are usually 30 minutes long, it is essential that the story be simple, relatable and resolvable in the allotted time. Sitcoms aim at realism by depicting every-day, ordinary stories, typically within a family or workplace setting or some combination of the two. Reality shows contrive "real" situations that range from romance to law enforcement to wilderness survival while allowing the viewers to participate as observers. Over the timespan of several decades, television has historically attempted to reflect impressions of the culture and anxieties of the American home and family.

CULTIVATION, SOCIAL COGNITIVE THEORIES AND PSYCHOLOGICAL MECHANISMS

Cultivation and social cognitive theories can help explain how and why exposure to television programs affects perceptions, values, and behavior. Hawkins and Pingree (1982) found that exposure to television content shapes the construction of social reality. Indeed, television content often shares many real and non-real world characteristics and potential life situations, which can often influence collective and individual consciousness (Chaffee, 1977; McQuail, 1972). How these effects are explained may come from social learning (Bandura, 1977), perceptions and values research (Gerbner et al., 1980), or social roles (Arnett, 1995; Meyrowitz, 1985). These lines of research assume viewers can learn what to believe and how to behave by observing others on television. Shapiro and Lang (1991) take this one step further by suggesting that viewed television content may function like a mental event, which can distort reality judgments.

Cultivation theory explores how general television consumption affects perceptions of reality. There are different views on cultivation such as the learning and construction model and the availability heuristic model (Schroeder, 2005). According to the learning and construction model, cultivation processes are active and require more cognitive rationalizing, while the availability heuristic model suggests cultivation processes are passive, and conversely require less cognitive rationalizing (Schroeder, 2005). Cultivation theory also argues that there are two main effects with exposure to television content. The first-order effect posits that heavy viewers of television come to perceive the real world as paralleling that of the televised world, while second-order effects take place in heavy viewers' attitudes, which are more likely to be shaped by those presented on television (Gerbner et al., 1980,

1986).

Cultivation theory differs from social cognitive theory (formerly known as social learning theory) through the manner in which individuals respond to media content. Behavior in cultivation theory often asserts itself in response to exaggerated media content (number of police officers, crime, lawyers, and criminals as portrayed on television) mostly through inaction to do things or go places due to fear. Here, the exaggerated television world can become the “perceptual reference” point for heavy viewers, which can influence behavior. Social cognitive theory is more affirmative and behavior extends itself through modeling. In this sense, the perceptual references created by television exposure within cultivation theory would need to precede any potential modeling behavior in order for social cognitive theory to function appropriately.

Social cognitive theory focuses on how people observe and interpret the behavior of others and respond by adjusting their own behavior. The process is often called *modeling*. Social cognitive theory posits that people, especially adolescents and young adults, often emulate or use media content as bases for decision-making and judgments. Here, the television world can create norms and expectations, which can influence behavior in a number of different contexts (Bandura, 1986). For viewers, especially heavy viewers, fictitious images and behaviors can be recalled by individuals at certain episodes during their life span, which may influence their decision-making. Ultimately, social cognitive theory, as proposed by Bandura (2001), posits that the media have powerful effects and that consumers of media actively learn from television content.

Shapiro and Lang’s (1991) ground-breaking article is quite relevant to cultivation theory and social cognitive theory because it discusses how these theories can work through psychological processes and mechanisms. Here, the influence of exposure to television content over time may confuse reality-monitoring processing abilities, which can inadvertently influence judgments about the real world. They note that:

Because contextual information typically associated with television memories may be systematically similar to contextual information associated with memories of real events, television event memories may be more likely to be judged relevant to social reality decisions than some memories with the same content but from other communication sources (p. 686)

The psychological mechanisms that can influence and incorporate television content into one’s worldview and behavior are crucial in terms of understanding how cultivation or social cognitive theories work.

Nonetheless, these psychological mechanisms may not work uniformly among media consumers. Other scholars who study reception of media content from the consumption side suggest that members of shared sociodemographic characteristics can form “interpretive

communities” that process media messages in similar ways (Barak, 1996; Condit, 1989; Fiske, 1986; Lindlof, 1988). Potter (1993) suggests people of different ethnicities, socioeconomic statuses, geographies, and other categories may process TV content differently from other groups and that researchers who focus on cultivation may disregard these differences in consumption processes.

Reality TV may be more likely to influence perceptions of reality or have more powerful effects on viewers over fictitious sitcom programming because the participants appear to be like “ordinary” people in real situations. This increases identification with the characters, which increases likelihood of imitation (Bandura, 2001). Indeed, with reality dating shows, participants may be seen as peer group members for viewers if they are perceived as “real people” (Strasburger, 1995). At least with reality dating shows, researchers have found that modeling by adopting dominant themes can result from exposure to these kinds of programs (Ferris et al., 2007). Rosen (2004) and Stefanone and Lackaff (2009) also found that behaviors associated with reality TV may be more likely to be seen as normal and acceptable for heavy viewers of these types of programs. Ultimately, these studies support Shrum et al.’s (1998) hypothesis that heavy viewers of media genres like reality TV may be influenced by the messages within the programming.

AFRICAN-AMERICANS AND TELEVISION

While this study examines the differences between perceived realism and attitudes of admiration for characters within sitcom and reality TV programming, it is also the first to use predominantly African-American subjects as respondents. African-Americans constitute a unique and understudied sample in that television has a prominent role in their lives, as they watch more TV than Whites (Ward, 2004), while media content has often displayed them in unfavorable lights (Allen & Hatchett, 1986). Studies examining African-Americans and the media are quite diverse, yet can be grouped in at least five general categories: entertainment media and stereotypes (Fleras, 1995), negative images in news media (Entman & Rojecki, 2001; Muharrar, 1998; Paletz & Entman, 1981), news and self-esteem (al-Kaleem, 2001; Milkie, 1999; Ward, 2004), gender representation in news media (Dyson, 2003; Howard, 2002; Meyers, 2004; Wood, 2008), and consumption of news media (Gerson, 1966). The level of ethnic identification and exposure to ethnic media over time also appears to be related (Jeffres, 2000), while the amount of national TV news exposure and social capital is more positive for Blacks than it is for Whites, which may be a result of Black oral tradition and storytelling (Beaudoin, 2009). Appiah (2004) also found that subsets of African-American communities receive media equally from White and Black-targeted media while Black audiences are more attracted to media with Black characters, relate more with Black characters, and recall more content from Black characters.

While studies focusing on African-Americans and TV in general are easy to find, studies focusing specifically on African-Americans and reality TV are not as easily located. Many studies, like Nabi's (2007), may include African-Americans in their surveys, yet they represent only a small fraction of respondents. Even though reality TV show characters are predominantly White (81%), Black participants still constitute 14% of program participants (Ferris et al., 2007). This suggests that these shows would be of interest to African-Americans (Appiah, 2004).

Eschholz et al. (2002) were virtually the only researchers to investigate African-American perspectives in relation to reality TV. This study found that there are distinct differences between African-American and White reactions to reality TV. Indeed, watching reality crime programming improved attitudes toward the police for Whites, but not for Blacks (Eschholz et al., 2002). This study questions the uniform effects of viewing television that cultivation theory posits and suggests that perhaps ethnicity, life experience, social structures, or other indicators may influence perceptions of reality for television viewers.

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between frequency of sitcom and reality TV viewing, beliefs of perceived realism of sitcoms and reality shows, and attitudes of admiration for people on TV among a sample of adult African-American college students. Studies note that reality TV is more believable than other programs and viewers may be more likely to adopt the themes present in the programming (Ferris et al., 2007; Leone et al., 2006; Rosen, 2004; Shrum et al., 1998; Stefanone & Lackoff, 2009). Indeed, African-Americans watch more TV than Whites (Ward, 2004), are targeted by reality TV, and are often misrepresented in media content (Allen & Hatchett, 1986). These conditions constitute a unique case study. Variables that hold true for other groups may not necessarily persevere for this understudied group given the special context. Perhaps African-Americans comprise an "interpretive community" (Barak, 1996; Condit, 1989; Fiske, 1986; Lindlof, 1988; Potter, 1993) differing from other ethnicities in terms of their perceptions and processing of television content (Potter, 1993). To-date, at least one study (Eschholz et al., 2002) has supported this concept. To examine these relationships, this study uses admiration for people on TV, perceived reality of sitcoms and reality TV separately, and frequency of reality TV and sitcoms as predictors of behavioral aspirations (desire to imitate people on TV), in order to test the following hypotheses:

- H1: Desire to imitate people on TV is predicted by perceived realism (of sitcoms and reality TV).
- H2: Desire to imitate people on TV is predicted by admiration for TV personalities.
- H3: Desire to imitate people on TV is predicted by frequency of sitcom and reality TV viewing.

METHOD

Variables

Media Exposure (frequency of TV viewing). Amount of TV exposure has been found to impact audience's perceptions and values (Gerbner et al., 1980). Previous studies note that the amount of exposure to television programming affects attitudes related to TV content, and that the ability to select programming through more viewing choices reduces this effect (Perse, Ferguson, & McLeod, 1994).

Perceived Realism. Research consistently supports the finding that reality TV viewers understand that reality TV is both a contrived version of reality and even a misrepresentation of reality, but that this does not deter them from watching (Hill, 2005; Lundy, Ruth, & Park, 2008). In fact, Hill (2000) notes that audiences sometimes welcome a polished version of reality as they "do not always wish to be reminded of the economic and political problems" (p. 210). A postmodern reading of reality TV consumption argues that viewers must overcome the inherent contradictions of a staged 'reality' by blending the fantastic elements of the program content with their own lived experiences to create a self-referential authenticity (Rose & Wood, 2005). A uses and gratifications approach to the question of perceived realism in reality TV found that audience members who used reality TV for its entertaining and relaxing value (rather than informative value) perceived the interaction in the shows as realistic (Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2007). It is clear that the more viewers perceive programs as realistic, the more they are affected and influenced by them (Leone et al., 2006).

Admiration for People on TV. Social identity theory proposes that people tend to admire and want to be like people who are similar to them (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Social identity refers to self-concepts derived from perceptions of belonging to particular social groups (Hogg & Vaughan, 2002). In media research, social identity theory predicts that through selective exposure, individuals will see and admire people on TV who are from a similar social group (Trepte & Krämer, 2006). In fact, for people with low mobility and few interpersonal contacts, reality TV fulfilled a companionship function (Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2007), further supporting the idea that reality TV viewers identify with the people they see on TV.

Behavioral Goal (desire to act like people on TV). Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001) suggests that preexisting attitudes toward a subject (in this case, people on TV) predict behavioral intent. Research on makeover-themed reality shows has found that exposure to

a reality show depicting a surgical makeover was positively related to the desire to alter one's appearance and be like people on TV (Markey & Markey, 2010). The depiction of reality TV characters as everyday ordinary people furthers the notion of admiration as identification. The intimacy created with first-person narratives, highlighting the fact that cast members are not professional actors, communicates the idea that what is happening on the show could happen to anyone (Curnutt, 2009), and is likely to increase the desire and intent to become like people on TV.

Sample

The data for this study were collected from a convenience sample of adult undergraduate students ($N = 211$) from a Historically Black University in the United States during visits throughout the 2009-2010 academic year. The average age of respondents was 19.5 years and roughly 81% of the respondents were female. In relation to seniority, 14% were seniors, 26% were juniors, 20% were sophomores and 37% of respondents were freshmen.¹ All respondents voluntarily filled out the survey either in a classroom setting or in a different area of campus.

Because reality TV targets young adults from 18 years of age until their 30s (Hill, 2005; Mongrain, 2005), using college students seemed appropriate given the similarity in ages. Nonetheless, the use of students often raises questions about the generalizability of the results. In this case, given the ages of reality TV viewers and the popularity of both sitcoms and reality TV programs among respondents, this is an appropriate sample group.

Measures

We created a survey that measured African-American college student media use and their perceptions in order to test our hypotheses. The independent variables consisted of perceived realism, admiration for people on TV, frequency of reality TV and sitcom viewing, while the dependent variable was the desire to imitate people on TV (behavioral goal). Frequency of reality TV and sitcom viewing was measured based on the number of reported hours per week spent viewing that type of programming. This measure is slightly abbreviated compared to Salomon and Cohen (1978), who focused on how many days during a typical

¹The initial survey ($n = 128$) did not include race because it was assumed the majority of respondents would be African-American. The revised survey ($n = 83$) included demographic variables and of those responses, 88.3% self-reported as Black/African-American, 1.3% as Asian, 1.3% as White and 9.1% as other. It is probable those who chose the "other" category were of mixed race. Females constituted 80.5% of respondents.

week respondents watched television, as well as the number of hours per day they watched various programming. Perceived realism of sitcoms and reality shows was measured with a Likert-type scale question asking participants to rate their level of agreement with the statements, "Sitcoms accurately depict everyday life" and "Reality TV accurately depicts everyday life." Attitude towards people on TV was measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale with the item, "I admire the people that I see on TV," while the behavioral goal was measured with the item, "I want to be like the people I see on TV."

Data Analysis

Data were entered into SPSS 15.0 and analyzed using descriptive statistics and simple linear regression.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the independent and dependent variables. Overall, the mean for perceived realism was low for both sitcoms ($M=2.19$, $SD=1.06$) and reality TV ($M=2.00$, $SD=1.11$). Interestingly, perceived realism was slightly higher for sitcoms than reality TV. On average, students reported admiration for TV personalities ($M=2.56$, $SD=1.09$) and desire to imitate them ($M=2.35$, $SD=1.22$) below the midpoint on a 5 point Likert-type scale. Respondents reported practically equal frequency of sitcom and reality TV viewing, with an average of approximately 2 and a half hours per week reported for each genre.

Perceived realism of reality TV (REAL-RTV) was a significant predictor of desire to imitate (IMIT), $\beta = .268$, $t(120) = 2.56$, $p = .012$. Admiration for TV personalities (ADMIR) also significantly predicted desire to imitate (IMIT), $\beta = .638$, $t(120) = 6.93$, $p < .001$. In a simplified model that included only REAL-RTV and ADMIR as predictors, perceived realism of reality TV and admiration for TV personalities accounted for over 40% of variance in IMIT. Adjusted R-squared was .415, $F(2, 124) = 51.04$, $p < .001$. See Table 2 and 3 below.

The first hypothesis (H1) was partially supported. Perceived realism was a predictor of the desire to imitate people on TV for reality TV, but not for sitcoms. H2 was supported, with admiration for people on TV being a strong predictor of the desire to imitate them, and H3 was rejected. Frequency of sitcom and reality TV viewing was not predictive of the desire to act like people on TV.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Measure	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Perceived realism of RTV – REAL-RTV (Reality TV accurately depicts everyday life)	1	5	2.00	1.11
Perceived Realism of Sitcoms – REAL-SITCOM (Sitcoms accurately depict everyday life.)	1	5	2.19	1.06
Admiration of TV characters/personalities. - ADMIR (I admire the people that I see on television.)	1	5	2.56	1.09
Frequency of reality TV viewing – FREQ- RTV	1	6	2.49	1.40
Frequency of sitcom viewing – FREQ-SITCOM	1	6	2.51	1.28
DEPENDENT VARIABLE				
Desire to Imitate - IMIT (I want to be like the people I see on television).	1	5	2.35	1.22

DISCUSSION

Our results confirm that attitudes toward characters depicted on television and the perceived realism of reality TV affects viewers' behavioral aspirations, among sitcom and reality TV viewing African-American college students. Specifically, the results indicate that perceived realism predicts the desire to imitate people for reality TV, but not for sitcoms (H1), even though viewers often realize reality TV is a form of staged reality and question its authenticity (Hill, 2005). Leone, Peek & Bissell (2006) argue that the more realistic television is perceived to be, the more likely the content influences viewers; our study suggests this is true for reality TV and not for fictional television programming like sitcoms among African-American college students. While our study did not specifically ask respondents about desire to imitate people on sitcoms versus people on reality TV, it does note that the perceived realism of sitcoms does not predict the desire to imitate people on television. It is possible that fictional programming is perceived as unrealistic, which would make viewers more unlikely to want to aspire to be like sitcom characters compared to characters perceived as realistic.

Recent studies help explain why predominately White viewers perceive reality TV as more realistic when compared with other television programming. Reiss and Wiltz (2004) and Strasburger (1995) note ordinary people are used in the programming, while Kjus (2009) argues reality TV is perceived to have an increased social interaction with audiences. Last, reality TV viewers often see themselves as 'voyeurs' into the lives of the television

Table 2. Regression Coefficients for Dependent Variable IMIT

Variable	<i>Coefficient</i> β	<i>Std.</i> <i>Error</i>	<i>t-</i> <i>Statistic</i>	<i>Prob.</i>
Constant	.684	.276	2.482	0.14
REAL-RTV	.268	.105	2.56	.012
REAL- SITCOM	-.158	.107	-1.479	.142
ADMIR	.638	.092	6.93	.000
FREQ-RTV	.085	.085	.997	.321
FREQ-SITCOM	-.111	.092	-1.210	.229

participants (Curnutt, 2009). Our study confirms these authors' findings in relation to perceived realism among African-American college student viewers.

Thus, when reality TV is perceived as real, the desire to imitate behavior seen on television in general increases. Our results also indicate that if viewers admire TV characters on either reality TV or sitcoms, they are also more likely to possess the desire to imitate behavior viewed on television (H2). Under these conditions, the desire to imitate television character positive and negative behaviors and beliefs would increase. Previous research has established the following attitudes and beliefs are linked to reality TV viewing: desensitization of human conditions (Davis & Mares, 1998; Brinson & Winn, 1997), racism (Davis & Gandy, 1999; Entman, 1990, 1992), basing of human value by body shape and size (Skeggs, 2009), perception that crime results from individual instead of structural influences (Cavender, 1998; Cavender & Bond-Maupin, 1993; Doyle, 1998; Oliver, 1994) and the perception that dating is a game, that women are sexual objects and that men are sex-driven (Segrin & Nabi, 2002; Ward, 2002; Ward & Rivadenrya, 1999). Among possible positive effects, specifically with reality TV, viewers who perceive the shows as realistic would be more likely to imitate social integration (Cottle, 2006), as well as have a desire to discover truths and genuineness (Calvert, 2000).

Interestingly, our results challenged the assumption that frequency of viewing predicts desires to imitate people on television (H3). In our study, the frequency of exposure to media content did not appear to influence the desire to imitate television content. Studies that support the frequency of television viewing as a predictor for viewer perceptions of acceptable behavior (Rosen, 2004; Stefanone & Lackaff, 2009; Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Health & Gilbert, 1996) may not be as applicable to African-American college student viewers. Surprisingly, this seems even more unique when one factors in that African-Americans in general watch more television than Whites (Ward, 2004). However, it is

Table 3. Regression Models

Measure	Full Model		Best Fit Model	
	β	<i>SD</i>	β	<i>SD</i>
Constant	0.068*	(0.276)	0.442*	(0.216)
ADMIR	0.637	(0.085)	0.613**	(0.088)
REAL-RTV	0.268**	(0.105)	0.229*	(0.091)
REAL-SITCOM	-0.158	(0.107)		
FREQ-RTV	0.085	(0.085)		
FREQ-SITCOM	-0.111	(0.092)		
Adjusted R-squared		0.443		0.443

Note: Standard errors are reported in parentheses. * indicates significance at the 95% level. ** indicates significance at the 99% level.

important to note that African-American college students in particular tend to be underrepresented in previous studies of reality television and cultivation effects. More research is needed to assess whether this group differs in its TV consumption habits and effects from other college students, and other African-American groups.

Our results also challenge Shapiro and Lang (1991). If there is an order of influence between what people bring to television versus how exposure to television content may influence viewers, our results support the notion that the latter go after the first. The direction of influence appears to be more powerful where life experiences influence perceptions of television content, more so than television's influence on the likelihood to imitate TV behavior in real life. In this sense, our results appear to support Brusselle and Greenberg (2000), Feshbach (1976) and Gerbner et al. (2002) in that personal experience may influence attitudes toward realism, judgments and the influence of televised content.

The results also question whether the desire to imitate behavior from television influences actual modeling as proposed by Bandura (2001), or if the desire to imitate behavior can influence perceptions and attitudes via Gerbner et al.'s (1980, 1986) first and second order effects. Frequency of exposure to media may be more likely to influence Gerber et al.'s (1980, 1986) first and second order of effects rather than through behavioral approaches to media influences. Although attitude and perception formation can be related to behavioral influences, this study does not look at how exposure to television content

shapes perceptions of reality like Chaffee (1980), Hawkins & Pingree, (1982) or McQuail (1972). Instead, it looks at predictive variables that would influence the likelihood to behave like television characters. If frequency of viewing may not be a predictor in determining imitative behavior, at least among our sample group, then other variables may elicit a stronger influence in viewers' desires to imitate behavior. In this context, perhaps Bandura's (2001) discussion of the influence of pre-existing attitudes toward behaviors may have a stronger influence. Our study is unique in that it focused on variables that appear to enhance the predictive ability of Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory.

Our results situate adult African-American college student television viewers as a partial "interpretive community" according to Barak (1996), Condit (1989), Fiske (1986) and Lindlof (1988, 2002). African-American college students appear to differ from general research results conducted with mostly White respondents in that the frequency of exposure does not appear to predict the desire to imitate characters on television. In addition, perceived realism of reality TV predicts the desire for African-American college students to imitate people on TV, but not perceived realism of sitcoms. In this regard, African-American college student viewers are similar to predominantly White viewers in terms of perceived realism. Findings from previous studies did not differentiate between programming genres. In this sense, our study only partially confirms Potter (1993), in that people of various ethnic backgrounds may approach and process TV content differently from other groups. It is likely that all groups, subgroups and individuals differ under certain conditions, while similarities also exist.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study was based on a cross-sectional survey, it is important to note that perceptions of realism in television sitcoms and reality TV and the desire to imitate people on TV should be seen as a gradual and cumulative process that takes many years. The same can be said of how life experiences influence perceptions of television programming. Furthermore, our sample group does not represent all African-Americans since college students may have different life experiences and exposure to diverse cultures to a degree that is greater than that of the general population and of other African-American groups. Findings among this sample cannot be extrapolated to the general African-American TV audience without further research. Finally, it is important to ask whether all reality TV programs share common features or themes that make them interchangeable, or whether there are differences in the effects of reality TV shows within different subgenres. The same needs to be asked of sitcoms. Nonetheless, regardless of the theme of the reality program, audience members, when thinking about reality TV, see romance and competition as the two most salient themes (Nabi, 2007), while major networks also blur reality with entertainment most often through sensationalism in other program formats (Breslin, 1990; Freeman, 1993).

This study does *not* address several issues related to cultivation analysis and social cognitive theory. First, it does not address how preexisting attitudes shape believability and identification with television characters or performers (Oliver, 1996; Zillmann & Wakshlag, 1985). Second, this study does not address Gerbner et al.'s (1980, 1986) first-order effects of cultivation theory. It does not ask if viewers' perceptions parallel those of the television world. Third, this study does not test if the respondents follow cultivation theory's learning and construction model or the availability heuristic model. The active versus passive variables of these processes would need to be tested only after the relationship between reality TV and sitcoms is established. Finally, in order to study the influence of television through a social cognitive theory lens, researchers would have to observe or measure viewer behaviors. This study focused on establishing the self-reported desire to imitate people on TV focusing on two popular two media genres; only after this is supported can behavioral effects be studied.

Our findings raise a series of additional questions that would require both comparative research across racial and ethnic groups and analyses of reality TV and sitcom content, particularly with respect to depictions of minorities. For future research, there is a need to determine the kinds of television sitcoms and reality TV shows that African-Americans watch, as well as the percentage of African-Americans in the actual television shows. The racial make-up of the television shows may influence their perceived realism, admiration and likelihood to imitate people on TV. Along these lines, Appiah (2004) notes that African-American audiences are more attracted to media with Black characters, identify more with Black characters, and recall more content from Black characters. In addition, like everyone else, it is likely that the amount and quality of contact African-Americans have with other races may influence their perceptions and aspirations as well. Other factors such as class, education, geographic location, religion, and family upbringings are also important variables needing further examination.

As one begins to comprehend, the type of program, ethnicity, life experiences and order of effects are all important. As such, an understanding of sub-genres may be important as respondents may believe and identify with the people on TV differently. With one study (Eschholz et al., 2002), the first-order effects appeared to work with a perception that more crime exists than in reality among viewers, yet the second-order effects differed by race, with White viewers more likely to have improved attitudes toward the police than Black viewers. This was interesting because African-Americans were more likely to watch reality police programs than Whites when comparing viewership to population data (Eschholz et al., 2002). As one can see, viewers' relationships with reality TV compared to traditional sitcom programming are only beginning to be understood, yet building theory of a new television genre takes time and many studies. Without a doubt, there is a long way to go before this research genre may be established as a predictive area of study. This study begins to fill this void by examining perceived realism, admiration and likelihood to imitate people on TV

among an often understudied sample. Logically, the next step in this line of research would be to use the findings from this study as a basis for further exploring relationships between exposure to television programming and modeling.

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MESSAGE DESIRABILITY, SOCIAL DISTANCE, AND REAL INFLUENCE: TESTING THE THIRD-PERSON PERCEPTION IN A GUBERNATORIAL ELECTION

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This study (N = 311) tests the popular media psychology theory third-person perception in the context of a gubernatorial election. The study finds a substantial negative linear correlation of the difference in perceived media influences on the self and on others with the message desirability (measured by subjects' perception of the message), which explains 37.5% of the variation of the third-person perception. The social distance corollary is tested in different dimensions. But only along the dimension of generality and when the stimulus is perceived undesirable a strong linear relationship between social distance and the difference in perceived influences is found. The third- or first-person perceptions that are shown when social distance is conceptualized in the dimensions of gender and ethnicity are not consistent with the theoretical expectations. Supporters of one candidate tend to think that people with no choice yet, rather than supporters of the other candidate, will be mostly influenced by the message. No evidence supports a relationship between the perceived media influences and the real media influences.

Keywords: third-person perception, message desirability, social distance, real influence

The third-person perception (Davison, 1983) is one of the intriguing media psychology theories (Perloff, 2002) that have generated a large volume of scholarship. Since being

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proposed, it has been tested using media messages such as news (Salwen, 1998; Salwen & Driscoll, 1997), commercial, political, or public service advertising (Gunther & Thorson, 1992; Shah, Faber, & Youn, 1999; Henriksen & Flora, 1999; Rucinski & Salmon, 1990), health (Chapin, 2000; Duck, Terry, & Hogg, 1995; Gunther & Storey, 2003), entertainment (Reid & Hogg, 2005), pornography (Gunther, 1995; Lo & Wei, 2005; Rojas, Shah, & Faber, 1996; Wu & Koo, 2001), hate speech (Price, Tewksbury & Huang, 1998), defamatory speech (Cohen, Mutz, Price & Gunther, 1988; Gunther, 1991), television violence (Gunther & Hwa, 1996; Hoffner, Buchanan, Anderson, Hubbs, Kamigaki, Kowalczyk, Pastorek, Plotkin, & Silberg, 1999; Salwen & Dupagne, 1999), horror movies (Mundorf, Weaver, & Zilmann, 1989) and rap lyrics (McLeod, Eveland, & Nathanson, 1997). Although most of the third-person perception studies were conducted in the U.S., the theory has also been tested in Europe (Peiser & Peter, 2000), Australia (Duck et al, 1995; Duck & Mullin, 1995), South Korea (Lee & Tamborini, 2005), Singapore (Gunther & Hwa, 1996; Wu & Koo, 2001), Nepal (Gunther & Storey, 2003), and Israeli (Tsfati & Cohen, 2003). The theoretical prediction is found quite robust (Lambe & McLeod, 2005; Mutz, 1998).

The third-person perception theory essentially predicts that people tend to overestimate the influence that mass communications have on the attitude and behavior of others compared to the self (Davison, 1983). Later research has found that, nevertheless, on topics that are perceived as positive or prosocial, people generally believe that they are more affected than the others, generating a reverse third-person or first-person phenomenon (Davison, 1996; Park & Salmon, 2005). The first-person phenomenon is not as robust (David, Liu & Myser, 2004), and whether it exists is still controversial (Lambe & McLeod, 2005). Although third-person perception may have also taken place as early as in the previous forms of communications, it would be more influential in the era of mass media when “public opinion exerts a significant impact on political and social behavior and affects mass and elite decisions” (Perloff, 2002, p.491). Third-person perception explains how communications can influence the formation of public opinion without directly affecting individual opinions (Mutz, 1989).

Davison (1983) has discussed the possible influences of this psychological pattern in three elections: the 1978 gubernatorial primary election in Maryland, and the 1965 and the 1972 national elections in West Germany. Several later studies also examined the third-person perception in the context of large-scale political elections, including the U.S. presidential elections in 1988 (Rucinski & Salmon, 1990), 1996 (Salwen, 1998), 2000 (Meirick, 2004), and 2004 (Banning, 2006), and the Australia federal election in 1993 (Duck et al, 1995). Altogether, however, the influences of the third-person perceptions to the elections are under-explored (Mutz, 1998). This study aims at testing the third-person hypothesis in a gubernatorial election and explores its influences on the perceived election results.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous research has identified several factors that influence the magnitude of the third-person perception. The third-person perception increases with ego-involvement (Perloff, 1993, 2002; Reid and Hogg, 2005), social identification (Duck et al., 1995; Price et al, 1998), and self-other social distance (Cohen et al, 1988; Eveland, Nathanson, Detenber, & McLeod, 1999; McLeod et al, 1997) and decreases with message desirability (Duck et al, 1995; Gunther & Thorsen, 1992; Park & Salmon, 2005). There is mixed evidence for third-person perception due to topic knowledge, age, education, and gender. For example, Davison (1996) and Perloff (2002) mention some studies that acknowledge demographical factors' role in moderating the difference in perceived media influences, while Salwen and Dupagne (1999) finds limited empirical evidence supporting this conclusion.

Message Desirability

Previous research has shown that message desirability plays a significant role in shaping the perceived difference of message influence on the self and on others. Message desirability has been conceptualized as how desirable (prosocial) the message is perceived by either the researcher or the subjects (Perloff, 2002), with most of the studies adopting the researcher-perception conceptualization and naming it "social desirability" (Jensen & Hurley, 2005). Only Park and Salmon (2005) tested both and found that it was the subjects' perception of message valence rather the message valence presumed by the researchers that moderated the third-person perception. When the message is perceived as less desirable (prosocial), people believe that others are more vulnerable to the media influences in comparison to self (Duck et al, 1999; Gunther, 1991; Perloff, 2002; Salwen & Dupagne, 1999; Shah et al, 1999). When the message is perceived as more desirable (prosocial), people believe that others are less influenced than themselves (Gunther & Thorson, 1992).

Message desirability is usually measured at categorical level: positive or negative (e.g., Gunther & Thorson, 1992; Park & Salmon, 2005). Recent studies began to measure it with ordinal scale, such as Lambe and McLeod's (2005) nine-point scale from very anti-social to very pro-social and Jensen and Hurley's (2005) seven-point scale from helpful to not helpful. The third-person perception increases when message is perceived as undesirable and decreases when message is perceived as desirable (Jensen & Hurley, 2005; Henriksen & Flora, 1999). Some studies found the third-person perception appearing with least anti-social message (Lambe and McLeod, 2005; Park and Salmon, 2005) may be because they measure message desirability with researchers' perceptions rather than subjects' perceptions.

- H1: The perceived message desirability is a negative predictor of the difference between the perceived media influence on others and that on the self.

Social Distance

Typically, social distance is defined as the degree of similarity between self and others (Eveland et al., 1999). Holding that social distance includes perceived similarity, familiarity, and identification, Perloff (1993) notes that social distance can be conceptualized in at least two ways: the first as a continuum goes from “just like me” to “not at all like me”; the second as a continuum goes from “my closet group or community” to “my largest group or community” (p. 176). Most of the early third-person perception studies adopted the second continuum (Chapin, 2000; Cohen et al, 1988).

Recently scholars started to view social distance as an under-explored concept and try the first continuum (Pan, Abisaid, Paek, Sun, & Houden, 2005). Lambe and McLeod (2005) argued that social distance could also be measured in terms of age, gender, race, education level, and so on. Pan et al. (2005) believe that perceived similarities with different targeted others all can serve as important heuristics for people to evaluate the potential impact of media messages. Some pioneer studies have already adopted gender-based (Lo & Wei, 2005; Wan, 2002) or race-based (Neuwirth & Frederik, 2002) conceptualizations of social distance. In general, social distance can be conceptualized along the following dimensions.

Generality. Generality is the most commonly used conceptualization of social distance (Chapin, 2000; Cohen et al, 1988), which goes from the self to the one that is increasingly general and socially distant (Chapin, 2000; Cohen et al., 1988; Duck & Mullin, 1995; Gunther, 1991; Jensen & Hurley, 2005; Rucinski & Salmon, 1990). The measure can be ordinal, such as from “self” to “other Stanford students,” “others Californians,” and “public opinion at large” (Cohen et al., 1988), or dichotomous, such as “the self” and “other viewers of the ‘Amerika’” (Lasorsa, 1989). Perloff (2002) concludes that the “heart of the social distance corollary” is the “notion that self-other disparities grow in magnitude with increase in perceived distance between self and comparison others” (p. 497), which has been confirmed by nearly all the studies.

- H2a: When the message is perceived as undesirable, the more general the others are perceived, the more the others are perceived to be influenced.
- H2b: When the message is perceived as desirable, the more general the others are perceived, the less the others are perceived to be influenced.

Social status. Based on self-categorization theory, social status can be used to measure social distance (Reid & Hogg, 2005). According to Reid and Hogg (2005), compared with

Wall Street bankers, university students might self-define as young, poor, and liberal, whereas in comparison with high school students, their self-definition might be older, independent, and sophisticated. Self-categorization theory can be used to predict the direction and magnitude of the third-person perception. While generally small third-person perception will occur for intragroup social comparisons, large third-person effect will occur in intergroup social comparisons. If the media is normative for the self-categorized group, large first-person effect will appear in the intergroup social comparisons (Reid & Hogg, 2005).

H3a: When the message is perceived as undesirable, the further the others' social statuses are from the perceiver's, the more the others are perceived to be influenced.

H3b: When the message is perceived as desirable, the further the others' social statuses are from the perceiver's, the less the others are perceived to be influenced.

Political position. Another factor that noticeably moderates the third-person perception is ego-involvement (Park & Salmon, 2005; Perloff, 2002), which can be defined as "identification with a social group and possession of extreme attitudes on an issue relevant to the group" (Perloff, 2002, p.498). Political position, a measure of involvement in a particular political group, thus can also constitute a social distance scale. Research has shown that partisanship is a moderator of third-person perception (Banning, 2006) and the traditional continuum of liberal-conservative as a measure of social distance is positively correlated with the third-person perception (Meirick, 2004). In a political election, it is reasonable to argue whether to support and how strongly to support a particular candidate can be a measure of social distance.

H4a: When the message is perceived as undesirable, the further the others' political positions are from the perceiver's, the more the others are perceived to be influenced.

H4b: When the message is perceived as desirable, the further the others' political positions are from the perceiver's, the less the others are perceived to be influenced.

Gender. Little research on third-person perception focuses on gender (Chapin, 2000). Mixed evidence also appears in the few published studies. While some find no differences in third-person perception between genders (Rojas & Kruger, 1990), others report that gender makes statistically significant differences (Lee & Yang, 1996; Lo & Wei, 2005) or at least has some relevance (Howitt, Driscoll, & Salwen, 1998). Also, based on self-categorization theory, Reid and Hogg (2005) believe that demographic variations may pose a social distance and gender salience may be enhanced for women when they are asked to

judge the influence of normative media like diet and fashion magazines.

Lo and Wei (2005) formally tested the third-person perception using gender as a measure of social distance. They compared the perceived effects of Internet pornography on the self and each of the two groups: male students and female students, and found that both male and female respondents perceived that male students were more negatively influenced, with female respondents having a much stronger perception. Lo and Wei (2005) also found that gender was the most powerful predictor of supporting restriction of Internet pornography.

H5a: When messages are perceived as undesirable, people of other gender are perceived to be more influenced than the people of the same gender as the perceiver.

H5b: When the messages are perceived as desirable, people of other gender are perceived to be less influenced than the people of the same gender as the perceiver.

Ethnicity. Ethnicity and cultural identity may also be a variable in the function of the third-person perception. Although research shows that third-person perception appears consistently across different cultural groups (Gunther & Hwa, 1996), some scholars still expect culture to moderate the third-person perception (Perloff, 2002). Besides, there is research suggesting that ethnicity is relevant to generating the third-person perception, and some specific ethnicities were found to have predicting power on perceived media effect on the self (Salwen, 1998).

H6a: When messages are perceived as undesirable, people of other ethnicities are perceived to be more influenced than the people of the same ethnicity as the perceiver.

H6b: When messages are perceived as desirable, people of other ethnicities are perceived to be less influenced than the people of the same ethnicity as the perceiver.

Perceived Influence and Real Influence

Research has paid attention to the logical inconsistency on the aggregated level that exists in the third-person perception (Perloff, 2002; Tiedge, Silverblatt, Havice, & Rosenfeld, 1991). If the perceivers are right that other people are influenced by media, Perloff (2002) reasons, the perceivers too should be affected; if it is true that most of the perceivers are not affected, they exaggerate the media impact on others. Yet, up to now, only a few studies compare the perceived media influence to the real media influence (Mutz, 1998), and find that people both overestimate the amount of media influence on other's attitudes (Cohen et

al, 1988; LaSorsa, 1989) and underestimate the media influence on themselves (Perloff, 1993).

RQ1: Does the perceived media influence have a relationship with the real influence?

METHOD

Third-person perception studies usually are designed as surveys (Lasorsa, 1989; Rucinski & Salmon, 1990; Salwen, 1998, etc.) or experiments (Lambe & McLeod, 2005; Jensen & Hurley, 2005, etc.). This study used a survey with a stimulus, trying to explore the causality in a setting better than usual survey. Although the sample is only representative to a public university campus in the state, the sample should still be useful in testing theoretical relationships (Hayes 2005, Kerlinger & Lee, 1999).

Data Collection

The sample of this survey was drawn from the main campus of a large state university in the United States, with the method of multistage cluster sampling. All the students in a randomly chosen class from 30 randomly chosen departments at the university in Fall 2006 were taken in the sample.

In the late three weeks of October and the first week of November, 2006, before Election Day (November 7), all the instructors of the chosen classes except seven cooperated by allowing a 15-minute survey. The survey had 311 valid responses, generating a response rate of 61.8%. Among the respondents, 44.75% were male, and 55.25% female; 39.58% were freshmen or sophomores, 37.15% juniors or seniors, 15.97% master students, 1.74% 1st-2nd year doctoral students, and 5.56% 3rd year and above doctoral students; 16.67% were African-Americans, 2.08% Asian-Americans, 75% Caucasians, 2.78% Hispanic/Latinos, 3.13% International students, and 0.35% Native Americans. Their ages ranged from 17 to 60, with 93.7% below 30.

Given that previous studies show that question order usually does not matter in third-person perception research (Park & Salmon, 2005; Perloff, 2002), this study used just one version of questionnaire. The questionnaire was good in concealing the research goal. In the pretest, only 3 out of 30 respondents chose the correct research goal.

The article that served as the stimulus was a letter to the editor published in the state's major newspaper just a couple of weeks before the survey began. The letter criticized one of the two candidate from the leading parties (referred to as A hereafter) for having done nothing to support a popular bill. It also praised the contribution of the candidate from the other party (referred to as B hereafter) to the bill and called for support to elect B governor.

The letter was selected from several randomly searched articles because of its recency, relativity, and commentary essence.

Measures

Message desirability. This study conceptualized message desirability as subjects' perceived media valence, which was measured by three questions: "how much do you like or dislike the letter" with a 11-point scale from -5 (highly dislike) to 5 (highly like), "how strong do you think the argument of the letter is" with a 11-point scale from 0 (not strong at all) to 10 (extremely strong), and "how important do you think this information is for the election" with a 11-point scale from 0 (not important at all) to 10 (extremely important). Cronbach's alpha for the index is 0.79. This index was also used to divide the respondents into two groups. After the index was standardized, respondents who scored below 0 were grouped as perceiving an undesirable stimulus and those who scored above 0 were grouped as perceiving a desirable stimulus. No respondent scored 0 in the standardized index of message desirability.

Social distance. The traditional way of conceptualizing social distance based on generality was measured with a 4-point scale from "you," "your close friends," "students in your department," to other students in the university. Social status, in the context of the university campus, was measured with a 5-point scale from "freshmen/sophomores," "juniors/seniors," "master students," "1st-2nd year doctoral students," to "3rd year and above doctoral students." Political position was measured with a 7-point scale from the "strongest supporters," "strong supporters," and "general supporters" of A, "people having no choice yet," to "general supporters," "strong supporters" and the "strongest supporters" of B. Gender and ethnicity also served as dichotomous or nominal measures of social distance in different dimensions.

To identify respondents' political positions, three questions were used: whether they had registered to vote, for whom they were going to vote, and how much they supported A and B respectively with an 11-point scale from -5 (strongly oppose) to 5 (strongly support). Respondents who had registered and decided to vote for A were categorized as the "strongest supporters" of A. Those who had not registered but decided to vote for A were categorized as "strong supporters" of A, and those who had not decided for whom to vote but had positive differences when their degree of supporting B was subtracted from their degree of supporting A were categorized as "general supporters of A." The "strongest supporters," "strong supporters" and "general supporters" of B were similarly defined. Respondents who had not decided for whom to vote and had a zero difference between supporting degrees were categorized as "people having no choice yet."

Difference in perceived media influence (third- or first-person perception). A matrix question in the questionnaire asked respondents to estimate how much the letter to the editor influenced “you,” “your close friends,” etc., with an 11-point scale (0 = no influence at all, 10 = strongest influence). Pairwise comparison were used to analysis most of differences in the perceived influences along all the dimensions of social distance. When the difference in perceived influence along the whole social distance is needed, the conceptualization based on generality was used, because this is the only conceptualization that has been confirmed by previous research to have a linear relation along its points. Difference in perceived influences along the whole social distance was obtained with the formula: perceived influence difference = (perceived influence on students in the university) – (perceived influence on students in the department) – (perceived influence on close friends) – (perceived influence on you). The greatest value of the difference means the strongest third-person perception, while the least value means the weakest third-person perception or even the strongest first-person perception if it happens. The values could be negative numbers, but it doesn’t influence the analysis because the difference is essentially an interval scale.

Real media influence. Before reading the letter, the respondents were asked to give an “objective estimation” of the probability that A would win the election. At the end of the survey, the respondents were again asked to give such estimation. The difference of the two estimations was taken as the real media influence on the particular respondent.

FINDINGS

H1 states that the perceived message desirability serves as negative predictor of the difference of the perceived message influence on others with the perceived influence on the self along the whole distance. The negative correlation of the perceived influence difference and message desirability is highly significant, $r(301) = -0.61, p < 0.001$. A simple regression model, in which the difference of the perceived influence along the whole social distance served as dependent variable and message desirability served as independent variable, reported a coefficient = $-1.91, SD = 0.14, p < 0.001, R^2 = 37.5\%$. H1 was strongly supported. H2a and H2b state that the more general the other people are perceived, the stronger the third-person perception is when the message is perceived as undesirable, and the stronger the first-person is when the message is perceived as desirable. A series of paired t tests showed that when the message was seen as undesirable, the difference between the perceived influence on the self and on the close friends (obtained by subtracting the former from the latter for all the following cases in which paired t tests were used, and statistics of the differences were reported. Here $N = 162, M$ of difference = $0.49, SE = 0.13$.), on close friends and on department students ($N = 162, M = 0.82, SE = 0.12$.), on department students

and on university students ($N = 162$, $M = 0.78$, $SE = 0.13$,) are highly significant (for all three, $p < 0.001$. See Table 1). H2a was highly supported.

When the message was desirable, however, there was no difference between the perceived influence on the self and on the close friends ($N = 141$, $M = -0.10$, $SE = 0.15$, $p = 0.50$), on department students and on university students ($N = 143$, $M = 0.20$, $SE = 0.15$, $p = 0.19$). Surprisingly, a third-person perception showed up between the perceived influence on close friends and on department students ($N = 142$, $M = 0.37$, $SE = 0.17$, $p = 0.03$). H2b was not supported.

H3a and H3b predict that, the more distant the other people's social statuses are perceived from the perceiver's, the stronger the third-person perception when the message is undesirable and the stronger the first-person perception when the message is desirable. It is not clear how the respondents located in the middle of social-status scale perceive the self-other distances to people on both sides of themselves. The researchers took those located at either end of the scale to test the hypotheses. Paired t tests showed that, when the perceiver were freshmen or sophomores and when the message was undesirable, the differences between perceived influence on freshmen/sophomores and juniors/seniors ($N = 60$, $M = 0.28$, $SE = 0.36$, $p = 0.43$), on juniors/seniors and on master's students ($N = 60$, $M = 0.15$, $SE = 0.21$, $p = 0.49$), on master's students and on 1st-2nd year doctoral students ($N = 60$, $M = 0.02$, $SE = 0.14$, $p = 0.90$), on 1s-2nd year students and on 3rd year and above doctoral students ($N = 60$, $M = 0.02$, $SE = 0.09$, $p = 0.85$) were not significant (See Table 2). When the message was desirable, the freshmen or sophomores perceived the juniors or seniors as being more influenced than themselves ($N = 53$, $M = 0.98$, $SE = 0.34$, $p = 0.05$). Other than that, they perceived no difference in influence on juniors/seniors and master's students ($N = 52$, $M = 0.37$, $SE = 0.21$, $p = 0.09$), master's students and 1st-2nd year doctoral students ($N = 52$, $M = 0.08$, $SE = 0.28$, $p = 0.79$), 1st-2nd year students and 3rd year and above doctoral students ($N = 51$, $M = -0.14$, $SE = 0.22$, $p = 0.53$).

Since the respondents falling in the status of 3rd year and above doctoral students is less than 30, Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-ranks test, a nonparametric equivalent of paired t test, was used to test the differences in influences along the social-status scale perceived by them. When the message was undesirable, master's students was perceived to be more influenced than 1st-2nd year doctoral students ($N = 9$, $p = 0.047$). Other than that, when the message was perceived as both undesirable and desirable, no paired comparisons along the social-status scale showed statistical significance. Both H2a and H2b were not supported in these two cases.

H4a and H4b predict that, the further the other people's political positions are perceived, the stronger the third-person perception when the message was undesirable, and the stronger the first-person perception when the message was desirable. The researchers also took respondents located at both ends of the political-position scale to test the hypotheses. In different situations when political positions reached some points of the political-position

Table 1
Differences in Perceived Influences along the Dimension of Generality

	Undesirable				Desirable			
	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
You	162	1.54	0.17	< .001	141	4.54	0.24	.50
Close friends		2.04	0.15			4.44	0.22	
Difference		0.49	0.13			-0.10	0.15	
Close friends	162	2.01	0.15	< .001	142	4.41	0.22	.03
Department students		2.83	0.17			4.77	0.20	
Difference		0.82	0.12			0.37	0.17	
Department students	162	2.82	0.17	< .001	143	4.76	0.20	.19
University students		3.61	0.15			4.95	0.18	
Difference		0.78	0.13			0.20	0.15	

Note: *p* is for the paired *t* tests with null hypotheses stating that the mean of the perceived influences in the below row – the perceived mean in the above row = 0.

scale, the expected third-person perception or first-person perception appeared (see Table 3). Nevertheless, the patterns predicted by H4a and H4b did not happen either to the strongest supporter of A or to the strongest supporter of B. Both H4a and H4b were not supported.

H5a and H5b predict that when the message is undesirable, each gender perceives people of the other gender as being more influenced than people of the same gender, while when message is desirable, people of the other gender are less influenced than people of the same gender. Paired *t* tests showed that males perceived females as being more influenced

Table 2
Differences in Perceived Influences along the Dimension of Social Status

Perceiver/ Perceived	Undesirable				Desirable			
	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i> diff	<i>SE</i> diff	<i>p</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i> diff	<i>SE</i> diff	<i>p</i>
Freshmen/Sophomores	60	0.28	0.36	.43	53	0.98	0.34	.005
Freshmen/Sophomores	60	0.15	0.21	.49	52	0.37	0.21	.09
Juniors/Seniors	60	0.02	0.14	.90	52	0.08	0.28	.79
Master's students	60	0.02	0.09	.85	51	-0.14	0.22	.53
1st-2nd year doctoral students								
3rd year and above doctoral students								
3rd year and above doctoral student	<i>N</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>p</i>
		Sum	Sum			Sum	Sum	
3rd year and above doctoral students	9	8.5	8.5	1	7	6.5	6.5	1
1st-2nd year doctoral students	9	30	0	.047	7	7	0	.32
Master's students	9	29	15	.40	6	0	6	.31
Juniors/Seniors	9	30	9	.2	6	4	11	.43
Freshmen/Sophomores								

Note: Difference in perceived influence = perceived influence in the below row – perceived influence in the current row. The null hypothesis is that the difference equals zero or that the positive sum of ranks equals to the negative sum of ranks. Paired *t* test was used when *N* is not less than 30. When *N* is less than 30, Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-ranks test was used and positive and negative sum ranks were reported.

than males when the message was both undesirable ($M = 1.07, SE = 0.23, t[73] = 4.60, p < 0.001$) and desirable ($M = 0.70, SE = 0.20, t[52] = 3.54, p < 0.001$). See Table 4). While females perceived males as being less influenced than females by the desirable message ($M = -0.96, SE = 0.21, t[81] = -4.68, p < 0.001$), they perceived no difference in the influence on both genders when the message is undesirable. Both H5a and h5b were only partially supported.

Table 3

Differences in Perceived Influences along the Dimension of Social Status

Perceiver/ Perceived	Undesirable				Desirable			
	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i> diff	<i>SE</i> diff	<i>p</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>P</i> Sum	<i>N</i> Sum	<i>p</i>
Strongest supporter of A	42	0.24	0.10	.02	9	24	0	.08
The strongest supporters of A	42	0.76	0.18	<.001	9	38	4	.04
Strong supporters of A	42	2.24	0.38	<.001	9	28	17	.51
General supporters of A	42	1.04	0.59	0.08	9	31	13	.28
People having no choice yet	42	-0.46	0.43	0.29	9	14	16	.89
General supporters of B	41	0.02	0.17	0.88	9	8.5	8.5	1
Strong supporters of B	The strongest supporters of B							
Strongest supporter of B	<i>N</i>	<i>P</i> Sum	<i>N</i> Sum	<i>p</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i> diff	<i>SE</i> diff	<i>p</i>
The strongest supporters of B	17	61	26	.33	37	-0.16	0.12	.18
Strong supporters of B	17	62.5	54.5	.84	37	0.41	0.39	.31
General supporters of B	17	77.5	60.5	.68	37	0.08	0.65	.90
People having no choice yet	17	15	132	.005	37	-3.24	0.59	<.001
General supporters of A	17	11.5	105.5	.017	38	-0.5	0.23	.04
Strong supporters of A	17	17	70	.14	38	-0.18	0.26	.48
The strongest supporters of A								

Note: Difference in perceived influence = perceived influence in the below row – perceived influence in the current row. The null hypothesis is that the difference equals zero or that the positive sum of ranks equals to the negative sum of ranks. Paired *t* test was used when *N* is not less than 30. When *N* is less than 30, Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-ranks test was used and positive and negative sum ranks were reported.

Table 4

Differences in Perceived Influences along the Dimension of Social Status

Perceiver/ Perceived	Undesirable				Desirable			
	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Female								
Female	75	3.03	0.27	.32	82	5.27	0.28	<.001
Male		2.88	0.26			4.30	0.26	
Differences		-0.15	0.15			-0.96	0.21	
Male								
Male	74	2.96	0.25	<.001	53	4.75	0.32	<.001
Female		4.03	0.29			5.45	0.33	
Difference		1.07	0.23			0.70	0.20	

Note: Difference in perceived influence = perceived influence in the below row – perceived influence in the above row. The null hypothesis is that the difference equals zero. Paired *t* test was used given that all *N*s are greater than 30.

H6a and H6b predict that people perceive people of other ethnicities as being more influenced than people of their same ethnicity when the message is undesirable, and less influenced when the message is desirable. Only two ethnicities that had enough representa-

Table 5
Differences in Perceived Influences along the Dimension of Social Status

Perceiver/Perceived	Undesirable				Desirable			
	<i>N</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>p</i>
		Sum	Sum			Sum	Sum	
Asian-American	17	28	47	.57	28	39	231	.015
Caucasian	17	58	40	.63	29	134	273	.13
Hispanic/Latino	17	0	48	.08	28	35	251	.007
Native American	17	0	62	.046	29	23.5	320.5	<.001
Caucasian	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>P</i>
		diff	diff			diff	diff	
African-American	117	0.33	0.16	.04	91	0.07	0.17	.70
Asian-American	115	0.17	0.13	.21	90	-0.08	0.16	.62
Hispanic/Latino	116	0.03	0.15	.86	91	-0.27	0.17	.11
Native American	117	-0.06	0.14	.66	92	-0.53	0.21	.012

Note: Difference in perceived influence = perceived influence in the below row – perceived influence in the current row. The null hypothesis is that the difference equals zero or that the positive sum of ranks equals to the negative sum of ranks. Paired *t* test was used when *N* is not less than 30. When *N* is less than 30, Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-ranks test was used and positive and negative sum ranks were reported.

tives in the dataset, Caucasians and African-Americans, were used to test the hypotheses. For the third-person hypothesis, no evidence was found (See Table 5). For the first-person

hypothesis, only African-Americans perceived that people of Asian-Americans ($N= 28, p = 0.015$), Hispanics/Latinos ($N= 28, p = 0.007$), and Native Americans ($N= 29, p < 0.001$) as being less influenced than themselves. H6a was not supported, and H6b was partially supported.

RQ1 explores the relationship between the perceived influence and the real influence. The difference in perceived influences along the whole social distance was found having no correlation with the real influence, $r(237) = 0.03, p = 0.61$. Along social distances conceptualized in other ways, although the strongest supporters of A showed a significant third-person perception with undesirable topic in perceiving strong and general supporters of A, a one-way ANOVA analysis based on this subset of data showed no significant difference in the real influence across the three groups, $F(2, 77) = 2.72, p = 0.07$. Gender showed no significant difference in real influence in the case of either undesirable message ($t[114] = -0.05, p = 0.96$) or desirable message ($t[124] = -0.12, p = 0.90$). African-Americans' first-person perception in the case of desirable topic also had no actual base. A one-way ANOVA based on the responses perceiving the letter to the editor as desirable showed no statistically significant differences in real influence across ethnicities, $F(5, 119) = 1.70, p = 0.14$. We hence concluded that there is no relationship between the perceived influence and the real influence.

DISCUSSION

Message Desirability

This study confirms previous research that message desirability, with its new conceptualization, has a statistically significant and substantial linear relationship with the difference in perceived media influences on the self and on others, a relationship that some previous studies aimed to, but failed, finding (e.g., Lambe & McLeod, 2005). Message desirability with the current conceptualization can explain more than a third of the third- or first- perception. It provides strong evidence that message desirability may be better served by being conceptualized from the perceptions of the subjects rather than the researchers.

Yet the linear relationship does not guarantee a first-person perception. When message desirability is categorized into dichotomous values, desirable and undesirable, the expected first-person perception does not appear along the social distance conceptualized based on generality, while the third-person perception is quite strong. Along other dimensions of social distance, significant third-person perception also appears where a first-person perception is theoretically expected, such as along the dimension of gender. This is consistent with the conclusion of previous research that third-person perception is more robust. Self-image protection, which has been proposed as the underlying mechanism of the

third- or first-person perception (Jensen & Hurley, 2005; Perloff, 2002), may lend explanation to the weakness of the first-person perception in the present study. Although the letter to the editor is perceived as politically desirable by part of the respondents, those respondents still do not think that it will enhance their image to acknowledge being more influenced by the letter.

The findings also lead our attention to the moderation of message topic to the third- or first-person perception, which previous research has paid attention to (Lambe & McLeod; Jensen & Hurley, 2005). Lo and Wei (2005) find that both males and females perceive males as being more influenced by Internet pornography, whereas in the current study, females are perceived by both genders as being more influenced by the political letter published in the state's major newspaper. The current researchers attribute the variation between the findings of this research and Lo and Wei (2005) to the topic change of the experimental stimulus. Message topic may interact with message desirability in moderating the third- or first-person perception, generating strong first-person perception (Gunther & Thorson, 1992), no difference (this study along social distance in the dimension of generality), or even strong third-person perception (Park & Salmon, 2005) when the stimulus is desirable.

Social Distance

Based on argument of recent research (Lambe & McLeod, 2005; Meirick, 2004; Pan et al., 2005), an emphasis of this research is to conceptualize social distance in different dimensions and examine their relationship with the third- or first-person perception in a political election. The hypothetical linear relationship between social distance and the third- or first-person perception is partially supported in the dimension of generality. The perceived influence of the undesirable message significantly increases step by step as the social distance goes further from "you" to students in the university.

No such linear relationship is found in the other two dimensions measured in ordinal scales. The reason that social status makes almost no difference in the perceived influences may be that, living on the same campus, the respondents perceive students of other status as having not much distance. It also could be that the respondents perceive that this dimension of social distance has little relevance to the topic in question. Although Political position makes some differences in the perception, these differences betray that this dimension probably is not linearly from self to the others. Both "strongest supporters" of A and B, under the situations of both desirable and undesirable, tend to perceive that "people have no choice yet" are more influenced than the "general supporters" of A, who are more influenced than the "strong supporters" of A. No one perceives a difference in the influences on the supporters of B. Those judgments are seemingly based on normal political knowledge rather than the self-other distance.

The two categorized dimensions, gender and ethnicity, draw our attention to some

external factors' impacts on social distance's moderating function. Arguably, we can say that these data tend to support the hypotheses based on gender fully. Females show a strong first-person perception when the letter is desirable. When the letter is undesirable, although they do not show a third-person perception, the means of the perceived influences on both genders decrease by almost half respectively. Likewise, males show a strong third-person perception when the letter is both undesirable and desirable, but the mean of the perceived influence on both genders is much higher when the letter is desirable than when it is undesirable. Research has shown that some social groups are more likely to be perceived as susceptible to some special influences (Scharrer, 2002). If some factors not included in analysis such as the perception of females as being more easily influenced by political information are controlled, the pattern might show up exactly as expected. The same guess applies to ethnicity. If factors such as the concern of racial sensitivity or racial rights are controlled, the expected pattern may also appear. Previous research has also found age as an external factor to interact with message desirability and social distance in moderating the third-person perception (Lambe & McLeod, 2005).

In summary, the traditional conceptualization of social distance based on generality works best in the theoretical expected direction in this dataset. Other dimensions do not support or even challenge the theory in the election context. Research finds that respondents change their perceived social distance to the targeted other people when different reference groups are used (Reid & Hogg, 2005). It might be interesting for future study to explore what the general rule for people to perceive the self-other distances that moderate their third-person perception is.

Perceived influence and Real Influence

An interesting finding is that the perceived difference in the media influence on the self and on the others has no actual base. Although data exploration shows that, for the whole sample, the estimated probability of A winning decreases a little bit, showing an actual message influence, the patterns of the change are not consistent with the third- or first-person perceptions. While it is a topic for media effect research to explore what is the real pattern of judgment change under the media influence, it should be third-person research's responsibility to detect "people who do not overestimate the effect of persuasive communications on others," "[H]ow do they differ from those who tend to exaggerate communication effects," and "[W]hy do some people underestimate—or overestimate—their own persuasibility" (Davison, 1996, 115).

Limitations and Suggestions to Future Study

Three major limitations of the present study need to be addressed: the method to group respondents in desirable or undesirable conditions is based on partisanship rather than randomization, which may allow some uncontrolled factors to interfere the expected third- or first-person perceptions. Second, although the changed estimation of the probability of A winning could serve as a valid measure of real media influence, because it is a judgment that may influence their voting decision, some could still argue that it is measuring perception of other's attitude change. A better measure needs to be developed by future studies to compare the perceived and the real influence of the media message, and find the perception's political consequences. Third, the study used college sample and a one-sided stimulus, which could be a reason why some of the social distances did not produce significant results.

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