Sexist video games decrease empathy for female violence victims

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Credit: Cristie Guevara/public domain

Young male gamers who strongly identify with male characters in sexist, violent video games show less empathy than others toward female

violence victims, a new study found.

After playing a violent, sexist game, these male players reported lower levels of sympathy and compassion (compared to those who played games without a sexist component) when shown a photo illustration depicting an adolescent girl who had been physically abused by an adolescent boy.

"Most people would look at these images and say the girl pictured has to be terrified. But males who really identified with their characters in the sexist, violent games didn't feel as much empathy for the victim," said Brad Bushman, co-author of the study and professor of communication and psychology at The Ohio State University.

Although many studies have shown how violent video games can increase aggression, this research—done with Italian high school students—shows that games depicting the objectification of women create additional issues, Bushman said.

The study, which was published today in the journal *PLOS ONE*, also identified which players are most likely to be affected by sexist and violent games and how exactly the games have their impact.

Results showed that male players who strongly identified with their character in the sexist and violent games showed the least empathy. And that was because they were more likely to agree with what are called "masculine beliefs."

"This finding gives us a better idea of what exactly a combination of violence and sexism in video games does to harm male players," said Alessandro Gabbiadini, lead author of the study, from the University of Milano Bicocca in Italy.

Other co-authors were Paolo Riva and Chiaro Volpato, also of the University of Milano Bicocca, and Luca Andrighetto of the University of Genova in Italy.

Participants in the study were 154 Italian high school student volunteers, aged 15-20 years old. (All participants had parental permission.)

Some of the participants played Grand Theft Auto games that contained both violence and sexism: GTA San Andreas or GTA Vice City. Bushman noted that in these games, women are secondary characters and most are prostitutes or strippers who are used as sexual objects by players.

Other participants played the games Half Life 1 or Half Life 2, which are violent but do not portray women in a sexual or sexist manner. In fact, the female character in the Half Life games plays an active role. A third group played Dream Pinball 3D or Q.U.B.E 2, games that have neither violence nor sexism.

Afterward, all players were shown one of two photo illustrations depicting a young girl who was the victim of violence. One showed a young man holding the face of a woman in one hand while making a fist with the other. The second photo shows a crying woman with a black eye with a man in the background.

Participants were asked to rate on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much) how sympathetic, compassionate and tender (along with other emotions) they felt toward the girl in the photo.

As expected, most of the results pertained primarily to the male players; game playing did not have a significant effect on how much empathy the female players had for the female violence victims.

But results showed male players who identified closely with male characters in violent-sexist games were the ones who showed the least empathy. These were players who were most likely to agree with statements like "When I am playing, it feels as if I am my character."

One key reason, Bushman said, was that males who identified with their [video game](#) characters were more likely to agree with masculine beliefs like "It is OK for a guy to use any and all means to 'convince' a girl to have sex" and "Boys should be encouraged to find a means of demonstrating physical prowess."

Bushman said it was significant that males who played one of the Half Life games—which were violent but didn't have a sexist component—didn't show the same lack of empathy as those who played the GTA games that combined sexism and violence.

"Violent video games are bad enough, but when you add sexism to them, that is especially toxic," Gabbiadini said.

Identification with characters is a key component in what makes these games so troubling, according to Bushman.

"If you see a movie with a sexist character, there's a certain distance," he said.

"But in a video game, you are physically linked to the character. You control what he does. That can have a real effect on your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, at least in the short term."

These results should concern parents whose sons like to play games like GTA, Bushman said.

"You may think the games are just harmless fun. But when boys play

them and identify with the male characters in the game, it can lead to agreement with some pretty disturbing beliefs about masculinity and how to treat women."

More information: *PLOS ONE*, dx.plos.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0152121

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