

NEGATIVE STEREOTYPES OF ONLINE GAMERS
AND THEIR COMMUNICATION CONSEQUENCES

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Abstract

Stereotypes allow us to quickly process information and assign meaning. The perception process, leveling and sharpening, and labeling confirm our perceptions whether accurate or inaccurate. Socializing agents such as media perpetuate the stereotype of a video gamer as a teenage boy who sits in the dark alone playing his game all day long. However, despite high social consensus, this stereotype may no longer be accurate. Research is beginning to empirically demonstrate that video gamers no longer fit the social stereotype. Understanding how inaccurate stereotypes influence our interactions is critical because negative stereotypes of gamers may lead to prejudice and inhibit communication between gamers and other groups in our society.

Keywords: stereotype; video gamer; self-fulfilling prophecy.

Negative Stereotypes of Online Gamers and their Communication Consequences

I am the mother of a teenage boy. He spends a lot of time on his Xbox 360. Over the years, as his interest has grown, I've often dealt with criticism regarding his gaming. People say, "It's anti-social." Or "There's nothing good about it at all." The solution, in these critics' eyes, is to "get him outside more. Make him hang out with friends." The concern is that he will become depressed and anti-social enough to want to hurt other people, or will only want to spend his time playing games, which may cause him to become addicted.

But are these stereotypes of gamers well founded? How valid are the concerns about social behavior for those people who spend time on their Xbox rather than in the company of "real people?" Will kids become addicted if they spend too much time on their game? And exactly what is "too much time"?

The aim of this paper is to examine stereotypes of video gamers by comparing research on gamers with stereotypes of gamers portrayed in popular media. My hope is that with a clearer picture of labeling and stereotyping, we can make more informed choices about the way we interact with those who choose to play video games.

Understanding that stereotypes often are self-fulfilling prophecies may cause us to examine our perception and treatment of video game players. By having a realistic view of gamers' behavior, our society can adapt to this prevalent and popular behavior and understand its benefits.

Definition of Stereotype

Stereotyping was originally a printing term used in the 1790's which meant "to make a duplicate impression of the original" (as cited by Ashmore, & Del Boca, 1981).

In applying the term to a wider audience, Walter Lippman, a philosopher and journalist in the 1900's, first identified the tendency of journalists to generalize about other people based on fixed ideas. He argued that people—including journalists—are more apt to believe "the pictures in their heads" (Lippman, 1923, p. 9) than come to judgment by critical thinking. Lippman (1923) noted that "for the most part we do not first see, and then define, we define first, then we see" (p. 50). He named this "great buzzing confusion of the outer world" stereotyping (p. 50). Merriam-Webster defines stereotype as a noun or a transitive verb, depending on whether you define "stereotype," or talk about a behavior: "stereotyping." The noun is defined as "something conforming to a fixed or general pattern; a standardized mental picture that is held in common by members of a group and that represents an oversimplified opinion, prejudiced attitude, or critical judgment." The transitive verb, then, is the action of employing the standardized mental picture that represents an oversimplified opinion, prejudiced attitude, or critical judgment. Social psychologists and communication scholars focus on the interpersonal aspect of stereotyping and add to the definition, that stereotypes are "often inaccurate" (Snyder, Tanke, & Bersheid, 1977). Sue and Kitsano (1973) find that stereotypes "influence behaviors toward members" (p. 83) of the stereotyped minorities. Thompson, Judd, and Park (1999) conceptually define stereotypes as something that "can be learned either from direct contact" or "from communications about the target group received from others" (p. 567). Park and Hastie (1987) distinguish between instance-based stereotypes and abstraction-based stereotypes, indicating that we learn stereotypes not only from our own experience, but from "socializing agents such as parents, teachers, and the media" (p. 622) as well.

Stereotyping is not necessarily bad; it may have several benefits. Stereotyping allows individuals to simplify complex information by categorizing it. Processing information about others require individuals to perceive many details about them. When we start processing, at the very basic level, our perceptions are aroused. Perception, according to Beebe, Beebe, and Ivy (2010) begins with the process of attending to stimuli in the environment. We must structure and make sense of the environment and all the information provided by the senses. We are constantly integrating small bits of information into something meaningful to us. According to Beebe and colleagues, there are many stages involved in the perception process, such as *attending* (perceiving the stimuli in the environment), *selecting* (choosing a specific stimuli to focus on, which means we are choosing other stimuli to not focus on), *organizing* (converting information into convenient, understandable, and efficient patterns that allow us to make sense of our observations), and finally, *interpreting* (assigning meaning). Beebe and colleagues (2010) have identified a complex process through which individuals assign meaning to stimuli in the environment. All of these processes are subject to the influence of stereotype-based expectancies. Each may facilitate or impede achieving an accurate understanding of the persons and events to which that information pertains (Hamilton, Sherman, & Ruvolo, 1990). If this process is described accurately, one can appreciate how useful stereotyping can be. If we must process all the perceptions we have about all the stimuli in our environment, it is useful to convert the abundance of stimuli into easy to assess pieces of information. This is where stereotypes can be very helpful. Having a “standardized mental picture” as Merriam Webster defines it, cuts down on the amount of organization we must do. It simplifies our processing to be able to put perceptions into

groups in our minds. So, both types of social stereotypes (instance or abstraction) exist as a way for humans to quickly categorize what they observe. Then, our perceptions become represented in our memory and available to pass on and guide us in subsequent judgments of behaviors (Hamilton, Sherman, & Ruvolo, 1990). However, these categorizations and/or labels may lead to inaccuracies (Snyder, Tanke, & Berscheid, 1977; Thompson, Judd, & Park, 2000) and prejudice (Martin & Nakayama, 2010).

Consequences of Stereotyping and Prejudice

Stereotyping does make it easier to identify patterns in people and behavior. However, it also keeps individuals at a distance. The tendency is to categorize people into groups and see them as such. Group members are not individuals. So, while stereotypes allow us to cluster many stimuli quickly, they also make it difficult to develop rich, meaningful relationships with those we stereotype. And what happens if our perception, and hence, our label, is inaccurate? Within the complexity of the perception process, there is room for error at any level—the opportunity to facilitate or impede an accurate understanding. People do not generally attend to details that may influence their perception. In some cases individuals may select the wrong stimuli to focus on, or organize and convert the stimuli into inaccurate perceptions. Often interpretation of meaning is faulty since social behavior is often ambiguous. Unless individuals confirm what they perceive they are not able to know if the perception is indeed accurate. Beebe, Beebe, and Ivy (2010) suggest three steps to forming accurate perceptions: increasing awareness, avoiding stereotypes, and checking perception. Indirect perception checking can be a helpful tool when seeking additional information to confirm or refute

stereotypes, but the reality is that perception checking is not convenient or possible in many instances.

Inaccurate stereotyping is only part of the problem. Whether our label is accurate or not, we tend to treat others the way we perceive them. Our perception is our reality. Further, when we communicate to outsiders our perceptions of the “other,” we influence how outsiders view the “other.” So, we can influence reality for those around us. Ultimately, when a group holds a certain belief about another group, it influences behavior of both the observing group and can also impact the behavior of the group being observed (Snyder, Tanke, & Berscheid, 1977). The labels that we assign, then, have power to shape our beliefs about what we observe. This is especially critical if we include attitudes and judgment in our cognitive simplifications—when we turn our stereotypes into prejudice (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). Imagine thinking of a person as “smart,” or “beautiful.” Positive labels such as these may not seem detrimental, but actually, they influence our expectation of behavior from the individual we are stereotyping. Snyder, Tanke, and Berscheid’s (1977) work on social stereotypes found real consequences to our impressions of other people. In their study, which examined the cognitive and behavioral consequences of impressions, they demonstrated that stereotypes create their own social reality by channeling social interaction in ways that cause the stereotyped individual to behaviorally confirm the perceiver’s stereotype. They asked whether individuals may have different styles of interaction for those whom they perceive to be physically attractive and for those whom they consider unattractive. The differences in interaction may in turn elicit and nurture behaviors from the target person that are in accord with the stereotype. They found that perceivers formed their initial

impressions on the basis of stereotyped beliefs about physical attractiveness. In their experiment the perceivers were all male and the target persons were all female. When the perceivers anticipated physically attractive partners of the opposite sex, they expected to interact with comparatively sociable, poised, humorous, and socially adept women. In contrast, men faced with the prospect of getting acquainted with unattractive partners expected unsociable, awkward, serious, and socially inept women. When they expected certain interactions, the perceivers then tailored their behavior to their expectations, becoming more “sociable, sexually warm, interesting, independent, sexually permissive, bold, outgoing, humorous, obvious, and socially adept than their counterparts in the unattractive target condition” (p. 663). The perceiver’s impressions then initiated a chain of events that resulted in the behavioral confirmation of the initial erroneous impression which may have elicited and encouraged reciprocal behavior in the target women. The women who were perceived to be physically attractive came to behave in a friendly, likable, and sociable manner. Independent raters observed that the women’s behavior was consistent with the perceiver’s initial stereotype. Applying this self-fulfilling prophecy to stereotypes of online gamers, imagine thinking of a person as “addicted,” or “socially inept.” Isn’t it possible that, by assuming these characteristics to represent the behavior of an individual, we expect that they will behave this way? Expectations can then lead to behavior which confirms the stereotype. The power to label an individual, while helpful, is dangerous in that it can become a self-fulfilling prophecy that circles back to confirm itself. In order to understand how stereotypes can be harmful and inaccurate, the next section first presents research on stereotyping in general. Next, a review of popular culture and media’s depiction of game behavior is looked at to discover possible

illustrations of stereotypical behavior. Finally, a review of the contrast between academic research of game behavior and popular media's depiction of gamers suggests inaccurate stereotypes in the media.

Research Perspective

Social scientists have explored the concept of stereotyping since research began. Usually, racial groups and gender groups are the focus of research on stereotypes. Nevertheless, the perception process that is initiated by stereotyping can be applied to many groups, such as video game players. As the printing use suggests, stereotyping is the process of taking one impression and duplicating it. This leads to several negative consequences that are discussed in this section.

Park and Hastie (1987) researched perceptions of category development and came up with the distinction between instance-based stereotypes—those beliefs we form from direct contact—and abstraction-based stereotypes—those beliefs learned from “socializing agents such as parents, teachers, and the media” (p. 622). They found that socializing agents often provide information that is the basis for one's perception of the category (group) rather than information about individuals, which leads to beliefs about groups as a whole. As this definition suggests, stereotypes inhibit personalized interactions. This becomes even more problematic when stereotypes are extreme and negative.

Thompson, Judd, and Park (2000) extended Park and Hastie's findings and concluded that “stereotypes that are received from others are more extreme, contain less variability information, and have higher social consensus than stereotypes learned from contact with individual target group members” (p. 567). In other words, abstraction-

based stereotypes are potentially more inaccurate yet influence more people, than stereotypes learned from direct contact. Given the illusion of consensus and that these stereotypes are more extreme, they will be harder to overcome. Stereotypes are difficult to overcome because people have a tendency to filter out disconfirming information and focus more on negative characteristics than positive (Griffin & Langlois, 2006).

Snyder, Tanke, and Berscheid (1977) found that “social stereotypes may influence information processing in ways that serve to bolster and strengthen these stereotypes” (p. 657). We tend to filter our information in ways that confirm what we already believe about a topic. In the case of video gamer behavior, if we believe certain social stereotypes of what video gamers represent, we may only notice behavior that reinforces our beliefs and disregard anything else as superfluous, or out of the ordinary. We have biases in information processing. We want to be right about what we perceive. We filter out disconfirming information since it doesn’t support what we believe. When we observe someone’s behavior that we already have an opinion about, we look for confirming evidence of what we already believe; such instances of confirmation are more easily noticed and brought to mind. Further, according to Snyder and colleagues, we “fill in the gaps in our evidence base with information consistent with our preconceived notions of what evidence should support our beliefs” (p. 657). We are biased toward information that confirms beliefs (E.g.: video game players who play by themselves at home are loners). Further, according to Snyder and colleagues (1977), “once a stereotype has been adopted, a wide variety of evidence can be interpreted readily as supportive of the stereotype, including events that could support, equally well, an opposite interpretation” (p. 657). In other words, when we expect certain behaviors, we actually

perceive those behaviors. Complicating perceptions further is the tendency toward a negativity bias—negatively perceived stimuli eliciting a stronger response than comparatively positively perceived stimuli (Griffin & Langois, 2006). When media depicts gaming behavior as negative, we expect certain behaviors from players, filtering out disconfirming evidence, filling in the gaps and having a stronger response than we might have otherwise. Also contributing to stereotyping of behavior is our intent to communicate beliefs to others. When reproducing a story, for instance, those with a communicative intent may not only produce a more coherent story, but also a more stereotypical story than those who do not have this intent (Lyons & Kashima, 2006). Part of this storytelling process involves making stereotypes more extreme through the use of leveling and sharpening, discussed below.

Allport and Postman (1947) in early research studied rumor transmission and found behaviors which they referred to as ‘leveling’ and ‘sharpening.’ Leveling allows information to be transmitted concisely, but often at the expense of accuracy; the rumor becomes shorter, but details are left out to retain an easily communicated essence. ‘Sharpening’ refers to the selected details often being exaggerated because they contribute to the essence of the message. Rumors, or stereotypes transmitted through second- and third-hand information, become more exaggerated and extreme than first-hand, or instance-based information. These types of exaggerated and concise stereotypes are known as abstraction-based because they are transmitted via a socializing agent, such as media (Thompson, Judd, & Park, 2000).

Abstraction-based stereotypes, defined earlier as those we learn from socializing agents (Park & Hastie, 1987), differ from first-hand exposure to behavioral instances.

According to Thompson, Judd, and Park (2000) abstraction-based stereotypes are more extreme, less dispersed, and are held with more social consensus than first-hand exposure to behavior. In video game behavior, this would mean that socializing agents such as media lend themselves to readers' extreme stereotypic, narrow, and popular beliefs about behavior. Second-hand learning by socializing agents such as media seem to account for the difference in perception, rather than the amount of information received about the group (Thompson, Judd, & Park, 2000).

As this review of stereotypes illustrates, there are negative consequences of stereotyping. However, popular media usually perpetuates stereotypes. The next section will explore the stereotypes of gamers portrayed in popular media.

Popular Media's Perspective

Popular media and marketing campaigns influence our behavior through pressure to conform to popular culture—culture shared in common by the majority of the population (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). With popular culture telling us what our kids need, a good parent may be confused about what is best for a child. When my children were young, I saw a Nintendo System with several games advertised in the local paper, all for the low price of \$25.00. I was lured into the idea that my kids should be like everyone else. Yet, popular media's view of video games has changed as the number of people playing video games has increased. Popular culture now describes video game behavior as “addictive,” suggesting that parents should worry that they have allowed harmful habits to develop.

Internet websites, magazines, and television all now have advice on how to handle the behavior of video gamers. The way it is presented usually is “Internet and game

addiction.” Is there truth in the claim that video game players are “addicted?” The following articles indicate the stereotypes of gamers disseminated through popular media.

In 2001, Elizabeth Woolsey lost her 21-year old son, Shawn, who shot and killed himself in front of his computer. Mrs. Woolsey attributes his death to his 12-hour a day gaming habit. She has received wide press and advocates against “this obsessive gaming disorder.” According to an article entitled “The Truth Behind Video Game Addiction” (2000), it is her opinion that “Designers create the games to be as addictive as possible.” Unfortunate as is her experience, by blaming game designers, Woolsey is perpetuating the group perception of video gaming as “addicting.” She uses words such as “hypnotized,” and “addictive” to describe the effects of gaming on those who engage in this activity. Similarly, Video Game Addiction.com, another online source, has articles available for users to view with titles such as “Doctors Tackle Addiction Issues;” “Pricey Addiction Costs;” and “Truth is in the Numbers.” Socializing agents such as these Internet sites have the potential to influence many viewers with abstraction-based stereotypes.

Mothers Against Videogame Addiction and Violence (MAVAV) is another site where parents can get “information.” Their goal is “educating parents of the world’s fastest growing addiction and the most reckless endangerment of children today” (mavav.org). According to the article “Video Game Addiction and Violence in Underground Video Game Cultures,” parents need to “never assume drugs or otherwise is responsible for your teen’s poor academic performance. Video game addiction should not be underestimated. It is a problematic epidemic plaguing students worldwide” (mavav.org). Alarmist language is common on such sites. Because setting up personal

websites these days is fairly simple, anyone can create sites where claims are made which don't require research to back them up. Presenting themselves as authorities on video game behavior promotes stereotypical ideas that many people do not think to question. Socializing agents such as media have power in our culture to sway social consensus. Yet group impressions are often exaggerated. MAVAV's website is a good example of stereotypical language with such claims as:

Video game addiction is without a doubt, becoming this century's most increasingly worrisome epidemic, comparable even to drug and alcohol abuse. All the while, the video game industry continues to market and promote hatred, racism, sexism, and the most disturbing trend: clans and guilds, an underground video game phenomenon which closely resembles gangs. Parents NEED to be aware of the hidden dangers. (MAVAV's website)

Concerned parents are given warnings about addiction like this on many sites. Further, labeling video gaming as an addiction may also be related to instrumental issues such as healthcare. For example, according to Lagorio (2010), the American Medical Association (AMA) "wants to have this behavior officially classified as a psychiatric disorder, to raise awareness and enable sufferers to get insurance coverage for treatment" (para. 4). Joyce Protopapas, a parent quoted in the article, said "video and Internet games transformed [her son] from an outgoing, academically gifted teen into a reclusive manipulator who flunked two 10th-grade classes and spent several hours day and night playing World of Warcraft" (para. 10). As this discussion illustrates, the depiction by popular media may relate to potential financial interests in terms of benefits of labeling playing video games as an addiction or a disorder.

However, not all medical opinion leaders agree with this. In fact, the AMA has not designated video game behavior as an addiction. In June 2007 the AMA concluded that “formal recognition of problem gaming as an addictive illness would be premature” (Davis, 2008). In December, 2007, the Report of the Council on Science and Public Health developed recommendations for physicians, parents, and legislators which stated: “As with most other forms of media, video games do have a potentially positive role, especially in the health care and health education sectors. Although there are some indications of a connection between the content of video games and aggressive and addictive behaviors, more research is needed in this area” (CSAPH, 2007). Dr. Michael Brody of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry agrees that bringing attention to the possible problem is good of the AMA, but said “excessive video game playing could be a symptom for other things. You could make lots of behavioral things into addictions. Why stop at video gaming? Why not BlackBerrys, cell phones or other irritating habits?” (as cited in Tanner, 2007). Obviously, there is a difference of opinion about how harmful video game playing might be.

Similarly, game developer (*Ultima*) and astronaut Richard Garriott, who coined the popular phrase MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game), observed that the stereotype will change as gamers earn money at what they do. He reflected on his time developing *Ultima* in the 80’s and noted “geeks were a subculture then. It wasn’t until we started earning lots of money doing what we loved that society decided being a ‘geek’ was cool” (Garriott, personal interview, May, 2010).

Although the negative stereotypes of video gamers portrayed by media and opinion may be changing, as illustrated by the views shared by Dr. Michael Brody and by

Richard Garriott, the accuracy of these stereotypes needs to be evaluated through empirical research. Research is slow in this area for many reasons, one of which is that many thought gaming was a fad that would pass. The current generation of so-called 'addicted' gamers has only been around a short time, since the 80's. Nevertheless, the emerging research in this area provides some support against the view of video gaming as addictive. Early results show a contrasting view of popular media's prejudiced and stereotypical image with actual empirical findings. Let us examine the literature in order to get a clearer picture of the stereotypes that have developed and whether they are valid. Scholarly video game research indicates that the stereotypes of gamers perpetuated in popular media may be inaccurate and inhibit the potential benefits of interacting with gamers.

Video Game Research

Certainly there is reason to be concerned about the use of technology, including game systems. Technology is a large part of our culture now. With so little research on the long-term effects of technology, parents may be right to be uneasy about what their children are doing. Translating concerns into factual evidence though is something that must happen. Inaccurate websites that use alarmist language are not the answer. New empirical data suggests that the stereotype of online gamers depicted by popular media and held consensually by culture is, in fact, incorrect. Having correct information about game behavior will help parents make informed decisions about how much time their children should play video games.

Jansz and Tanis (2006) note that though games are often the subject of public controversy, there is little published research. The public seems willing to digest articles

about the potential harmful effects of playing too much, yet there is little research to support this position. Public discourse has centered on the possible negative effects of gaming—social issues, worries about gaming translating into violent behavior, addiction concerns—yet research is just beginning to compile data to examine these issues. Video game research lags behind behavior because of the necessary time to properly conduct studies and surveys, and little crossover between the different fields studying the phenomena.

There are many stereotypes that come to mind when considering a ‘typical’ gamer, revolving around health, sociability, academic performance, and addiction. One oft-discussed concern of popular culture is video games and violence. The position of the media is that video games are violent and playing video games may lead to violent behavior in “real life.” However, Williams and Skoric (2005) found no evidence to support this position in their longitudinal study on gamers who play MMORPG’s. Contrary to popular opinion, the study found that players’ “robust exposure” to a highly violent online game did not cause any substantial real-world aggression (p. 217). After an average playtime of 56 hours over the course of a month (an average of 14 hours a week), with “*Asheron’s Call*,” a popular MMORPG, researchers found “no strong effects associated with aggression caused by this violent game” (p. 228). The researchers found that, compared with the control group, the players did not increase their argumentative behavior or argue more with their friends after playing a violent video game. Although violence is a concerning issue, popular media also asserts other concerns such as addiction. The research below addresses addiction and illustrates researchers’ resistance to labeling internet use as addiction.

Caplan, Williams, and Yee (2009) explored problematic Internet usage (PIU) in players who enjoy MMORPG's, linking video game behavior with others who enjoy online gaming. PIU is defined as a "multidimensional syndrome that consists of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral symptoms that result in difficulties with managing one's offline life" (p. 1312). Caplan and colleagues (2009) questioned whether problematic Internet use was driven by use of the game, or by psychosocial well-being that players exhibited before playing the game. In other words, does prolonged gaming lead to problematic usage, or do gamers who have previous issues engage in the game? Gaming to the point of interfering with 'real life' can be a concern for some who play video games, but is the stereotype accurate that all video game players are spending too much time on their game?

The hypothesis posed by Caplan, Williams, and Yee (2009) predicted the amount of time one spends playing an MMORPG is a positive predictor of PIU, which seems obvious. The researchers surveyed players of a mainstream MMO, *EverQuest2 (EQ2)*, by working with the game operator, Sony Online Entertainment. The researchers had access to the game's large back-end database, which allowed the linkage of survey data to unobtrusively collected game-based behavioral data. A final sample size of 4278 contributed to the information the researchers found. The instrument to measure PIU, the Generalized Problematic Internet Use Scale 2, taps five components of PIU, two of which are pertinent to this paper: compulsive Internet/game use, and negative outcomes due to Internet/game use. The researchers found that the amount of time participants spent playing *EQ2* was the *weakest* significant gaming predictor of PIU, counter to what one would expect. This finding reinforces the idea that it is not the amount of time spent

gaming, but the reason for gaming in the first place, that predicts problematic usage. Statistically, only 2% of the predictive behaviors of PIU were game-related impacts, i.e. time spent online. Much more influential on predicting problem usage is psychosocial well-being, impacting 36% of the outcomes. Conclusions were that pre-existing profiles or conditions are the root cause of maladaptive solutions to real life, i.e. using gaming as an escape that ends up increasing negative outcomes. Their findings suggest that problematic gaming is regularly driven by factors outside of the game. So, while game time is certainly an issue parents should monitor, perhaps the stereotype of gamers playing too much is driven more by the exception than the rule.

Research findings such as these indicate that gaming may be a symptom of other issues because there could be a problem with some gamers' reasons for gaming. What they do not show however, is a link between game playing and increased addiction, undermining popular culture's stereotype of gamers. To call something an addiction when it also could be called a hobby reinforces the negative stereotype. Accordingly, rather than labeling gamers' behavior as addiction, media and popular culture may need to reconsider other labels such as PIU and "self-regulation" (LaRose, Lin, & Eastin, 2003) because they indicate the individuals have responsibility and ownership of the behavior. In their study of media habits and addiction, LaRose and associates (2003) found the term 'addiction' may be abused to "generate a sense of urgency about psychological problems that alarmists wish to profit from 'curing'" (p. 227). Further, they question why more people are not addicted to the media, and also how people could succeed in recovering from media addictions on their own, given the constant bombardment of sensory cues that would remind one of the addiction. They suggest a

more proper term would be unregulated media behavior, rather than addictive media behavior. In this the “cure” is in the individual’s self-regulation rather than on a third party expert. Their findings suggest that using language to reframe behavior in a more positive light—deficient self-regulation rather than addiction--may limit the negative effects of stereotyping and showcase benefits from positive effects of video gaming.

In fact, more research is discovering positive aspects of gaming in studying player demographics. Yee, with over 30 published papers, adds to the body of quantitative research focusing on gaming behavior. Beginning in 2004, he gathered online survey data over a period of three years from 30,000 participants and formed theoretical questions about the motivations and relationship formation of MMORPG users. Yee (2007) argues that games are windows and catalysts in existing relationships in the material world. Yee (2006) researched the motivations of gamers and found many reasons to continue studying this new population. His rationale was to research what people actually do when they choose to be in a gaming environment, rather than propagate existing research which tends to focus on the negative effects of playing games.

Since research tends to view gamers as a youth subculture—an attitude that is reflected in most research that perpetuates the assumption held by popular culture that mainly adolescents play video games—Yee collected data that broadens the view of who plays and for how long. He found the average age of the respondents in his three year study to be 26.57, with more than half working full-time and a quarter going to school full-time. Thirteen percent were middle-aged, differing greatly from the stereotypical image of the male teenager. Time spent on the game averaged 22.71 hours per week,

with only about 9% of respondents spending more than 40 hours a week playing. Again, these findings are opposite to the stereotype of a teenage boy playing all day long. Yee concluded that MMORPG users challenge the stereotypical profile of a gamer, and noted that researchers should pay attention to the demographic information in future studies.

Further, Yee (2006) found other positive aspects of playing games. Findings indicate that MMORPG users make friends online in a context that is quickly becoming the norm, experience collaboration among groups, are motivated to achieve goals, learn how to be leaders, and have opportunities to motivate others and deal effectively with group conflicts. He concluded by stating that “the stereotype of video games as trivial past-times [*sic*] or as creators of violent teenage criminals serve only to hinder more fruitful research into how social identity and social relationships are being transformed in the emerging environments” (p. 34).

Williams, Yee, and Caplan (2008) continued research on gamers’ behavior to further establish the framework of “who plays, how much” for this population. They found that the average age of a player was going up (from Yee’s 2006 work), now to 31.6 years, and the largest concentration of players was in their 30’s. This indicates that the stereotype of teen boys playing is becoming quickly outdated. Interestingly, they found that older players play more than younger players, with an average of about 27 hours per week, split between males and females. Women, though less well represented, play more than men. Players are healthier than the general population, which is to say, they are still overweight, but much less so than the average American adult. Average body mass index (BMI) for gamers was 25, compared to the general population BMI of 28. Gamers report engaging in vigorous exercise between one and two times a week, compared to “62% of

Americans over 18 that do not engage in any exercise that lasts more than 10 minutes” (Williams, et al., p. 1005). So, the gamer stereotype of players as unhealthy young men is in need of revision.

Williams, Yee, and Caplan (2008) concluded that the stereotype of gamers as young, male, and anti-social, is no longer accurate. When asked about the media’s tendency to depict gamers in a negative light, Yee noted “It is easy to sell fear to the public” (Yee, personal interview, November 20, 2010), but there is more to the story. With video game usage growing every year, it is time to have a realistic view of those who play.

Conclusion

A growing body of research now counters the stereotype held by popular culture. Diverse lenses such as communication, psychology, anthropology, sociology and education are being focused on video game behavior. Research such as that conducted by Yee (2006, 2007), Williams, Yee, and Caplan (2008), Jansz and Tanis (2006), and Williams and Skoric (2005) continue to chip away at the stereotypically held beliefs of gamers as young, male and socially inept. Nevertheless, the social stereotype of gamers persists.

How can we stem the negative stereotype portrayed by popular media? Marx, Brown, and Steele (1999) concluded that groups under the threat of stereotype, such as gamers, may have poorer performance because of the disconcerting and distracting knowledge of being viewed and treated stereotypically. Creating a climate of trust goes a long way because often, to escape the threat of stereotypes, a gamer may “disidentify” with the domain creating the stereotype (Marx et al., 1999, p. 494). Reducing the

concern of stereotypes could boost performance and create community between gamers and society. Understanding the formation and perpetuation of stereotypes can also be useful in thwarting their power. Our tendency to sharpen and level information, especially through third-party, abstraction-based socializing agents, such as media, can lead to inaccurate stereotyping. Beebe, Beebe, and Ivy (2010) emphasize the need to develop awareness of the tendency to stereotype and the consequences of that behavior. Thinking critically and filtering what we are reading or seeing from popular media through an increased awareness about stereotypes as potentially prejudicial and inaccurate will be important. Understanding the self-fulfilling nature of stereotypes will also reduce our desire to group people into in- and out-groups. Adapting behavior to be focused on the individual, rather than the group, can lead to a deeper connection and sense of community. Further, reframing some of the stereotypical language such as “addiction,” to put the responsibility for the behavior back on the gamer, could cause new variables such as “self-regulation” (LaRose, Lin, & Eastin, 2003) to be studied further.

Social science work, especially communication studies, frames, drives, and mirrors American public thought and news coverage (Williams, 2005). Researchers, then, have a responsibility to provide an accurate model and theories that reflect actual behavior. Working with other researchers and building empirical data across disciplines can more quickly build a prototype and profile of this new phenomenon. Williams (2006) states “We need to provide theory and data on these new phenomena before pundits in the mass media create the stereotypes that will frame thinking on networked games for the next decade” (p. 13). This paper intends to reflect the growing body of research that challenges that stereotype. By comparing media’s depiction of the gamer to

the growing body of data provided by research, it is possible that each of us can change the image we carry with us. By recognizing the power of media to propagate stereotypes we can look more clearly at those around us who we otherwise would place into categories because they look different or behave differently from us.

My teenage son, nearly 16, now attends the same university I do. He plays football and basketball for local community teams. He has a rich family and social life, both on and off his game system. He is a young male, so partially fits the stereotype. But that is only part of the story. As Williams (2006) warns, we must not drape our own ideologies, hopes, fears, and suspicions on who he is. Stereotyping is a useful though limiting tool. It is one that should be used sparingly. Knowing others first-hand will build fuller, more meaningful relationships and allow closeness to develop based on who a person is, not on who they are perceived to be based on stereotypes propagated by popular media.

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