

THE EFFECTS OF VIDEO-GAME PLAY: A QUALITATIVE STUDY  
OF PARENTS' AND SONS' PERSPECTIVES

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By  
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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

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## ABSTRACT

Since so much research revolving around the negative effects of violent video games has been inconclusive and often lacks first-hand insight, more research is needed to include the perspectives of the children who are playing video games and of the children's parents who are faced with the struggles of raising children who play them. As an initial step in gaining a better understanding of how children and parents perceive the uses and influence of violent video games, this researcher recruited 10 male adolescents, aged 14–18 years old, and 8 of their parents or guardians. Focus groups were used to facilitate discussion among the male adolescents, while individual interviews were conducted with their parents. The primary concern of parents was of game content and the way the content conflicted with their family values. Parents had a difficult time monitoring their children's game use and worried that the games would interfere with their social skills, education, and exercise. Boys used games to relax, work through angry feelings, and relieve stress, and often used them to socialize with friends. Boys did not believe that they had been negatively influenced by violent video games but were concerned that younger children were more vulnerable to the potential harmful effects of violent games.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

With the evolution of technology, many Americans now possess a personal gaming system in addition to video games that can be played on computers or hand-held devices. Not only has the variety of video games increased, the quality has improved, and the games are more realistic. Farrand, Nichols, Rowley, and Avery (as cited by Collier, Lidell, & Lidell, 2008) asserted that the computer and video-game industry grew to exceed both the film and music industries and was estimated that, in 2009, the market value was worth \$54.6 billion. “Gone is the simplicity of *Pong* and *Pac-Man*. Development teams for premiere video games may now easily consist of more than 100 people. Video games have original scores, detailed artwork, directors, producers, and story lines that rival many movies” (Collier et al., 2008, p. 107). In addition to the growth of the video-game market, the demographics of people playing the games is expanding. Video games are no longer being marketed to youngsters only. Since the depth of video games has become more complex, more adults are becoming avid video-game players. According to The Entertainment Software Association (ESA), in 2010, 26% of Americans over the age of 50 play video games, which is an increase of 9% since 1999. With this expansion, children are more likely to be exposed to extensive violence, nudity, and drug use, and are being rewarded for stealing cars, killing innocent bystanders, and murdering prostitutes (Collier et al., 2008). As the industry continues to expand, parents and legislators continue to

struggle to find a way to protect children from being exposed to this type of graphic content.

Currently, no laws restrict the sale of mature video games to children; however, the Entertainment Software Review Board (ESRB) is responsible for the enforcement of the rating system. The ESRB is a nonprofit self-regulatory body that independently assigns ratings and enforces advertising guidelines. Six category ratings are assigned to a game before it is sold on the market: EC (early childhood), E (everyone), E10+ (everyone, ages 10 and older), T (teen, ages 13 and older), M (mature, ages 17 and older), and AO (adults only) (ESRB, 2010). Since the creation of the ESRB in 1994, fewer than 30 games have been rated as “adults only” (Collier et al., 2008). “Adult only” games often are not sold in major retail stores such as Wal-Mart, Target, and Best Buy; as a result, these games are limited to independently owned operations. Because of this limitation, “adult only” games are rated as such only if they contain strong sexual content. This rating is not used if a game contains strong violent content only (Collier et al., 2008).

Legislating the video-game industry has proven to be a difficult task. Numerous attempts have been made to regulate violent content in video games, but time after time, the laws are found to be unconstitutional concerning First Amendment rights (Collier et al., 2008). According to an article in the *Wall Street Journal*, California proposed a law in 2005 to restrict the “selling or renting of games to minors based on legislative findings that they stimulate feelings of aggression, reduce activity in the frontal lobes of the brain and promote violent antisocial or

aggressive behaviors” (Braven, 2010, para. 3). This law was never enacted because lower courts found that it violated First Amendment rights (Braven, 2010). In 2009, the San Francisco Federal Appeals Court reported that the State had not provided credible research showing that playing violent video games was detrimental to minors and found that the law was also an unconstitutional effort “to control a minor’s thoughts” (Braven, 2010, para. 4). To date, there is little evidence showing that violence in video games has any more influence on children than the violence represented in any of the other print or media that children are exposed to on a daily basis (Collier et al., 2008). Until research can link video-game use to criminal or antisocial behavior, legislation does not stand a chance (Collier et al., 2008).

The effects of violent video games on aggressive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors have been the main focus for many researchers. These effects have been well documented and have shown a strong correlation between the two. For instance, researchers conducted a study examining whether or not playing violent video games produces aggressive thoughts (Anderson & Dill, 2000). Participants who had played a violent (relative to a nonviolent) video game were likely to produce a hostile-expectation bias, which is the tendency to perceive harmful actions by others as intentional rather than accidental (Anderson & Dill, 2000). Violent video games have also shown a positive correlation with aggressive behaviors such as arguing with teachers and getting involved in physical fights (Gentile, Lynch, Linder, & Walsh, 2004). Since so much research has revolved around the negative effects, very little research has been done surrounding the positive effects. One such study revealed that

playing a prosocial video game can increase prosocial thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Greitmeyer & Osswald, 2010). Other researchers have begun to examine the health benefits of games that involve physical activity. Research has been inconclusive regarding the health benefits, but researchers hypothesize that games that promote physical activity will derail adolescents from other such sedentary activities (Daley, 2009).

Research completed by Kutner, Olson, Warner, and Hertzog (2008) revealed four areas of parental concern regarding video games that include mature content. This study was conducted with focus groups that included 21 adolescent boys and 21 of their parents or guardians. The first and most frequently reported concern by parents was that of the amount of time their children spent playing video games. Parents were concerned that their children's physical health and social skills were being neglected as video games took precedence. The second concern parents frequently discussed was their inability to monitor their children's game play. Parents reported that they did their best to restrict games with inappropriate content within their homes but had little control over game play away from home. The third most frequently reported concern was that of game content. The fourth concern was the possible influence that video games could have on their children. Parents expressed discomfort with video games that depicted violence or nudity. Kutner et al. (2008) reported three main concerns that parents discussed concerning the violence portrayed. These included the realism of the violence, the target of the violence, and the context or goal of the violence. Parents involved in this study were unanimously

and strongly concerned about children's exposure to any sexual content, whether it was nudity or sexual acts. Interestingly, most objections to video-game content were driven by the mature nature that conflicted with their values at too young an age rather than the possibility of their children imitating these behaviors (Kutner et al., 2008).

### **Statement of Purpose**

“More information on parent perspectives is needed so that clinicians, researchers, and policy makers can effectively counsel parents on wise media use, plan or interpret quantitative studies, and develop effective regulations” (Kutner, Olson, Warner, & Hertzog, 2008, p. 80). Since policy efforts have focused on limiting the access of adolescents to mature and inappropriate game content, it may be helpful to better understand what parents are able to do on their own. Because little qualitative research has been published to include parents' perspectives, this study plans to explore this in more depth. Parents may also find it useful to understand how their concerns may be similar to or clash with those of their children (Kutner et al., 2008).

This study replicates the study completed by Kutner et al. in 2008. This study was intended to explore and identify themes in boys' (ages 14–18) and their parents' discussions about video games. Kutner et al. (2008) focused on young adolescents because

- (a) their activities are less subject to adult oversight than those of younger children;
- (b) they may be more vulnerable to the influence of violent content during this stage of cognitive, emotional, social, and neurological

development and (c) the prevalence of externalizing problems tends to peak in mid-adolescence. (Kutner et al., 2008, p. 80)

Four major questions guided this study:

1. What are parents' concerns about their sons' use of video games and of games with violent content in particular?
2. What do boys believe their parents think about video games, and what do they believe are their parents' concerns regarding video games with violent content?
3. Why do parents think their sons play video games?
4. What influence do boys believe violent video games have on their lives or on the feelings and behaviors of other children?

### **Significance of the Study**

For social workers in schools or mental-health fields, it will be imperative to understand influences on maladaptive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Treatment plans in a mental-health setting may look different for those having problems related to excessive violent video-game use. One influence that is not always acknowledged during an assessment is that of video games, and this is because of the lack of research and significant findings surrounding this topic. A social worker may implement more parental controls, allowing a parent and child to collaborate on a time interval to restrict the amount of time an adolescent plays a game. Informing parent and child of the detriments accompanied with playing certain types of video games and encouraging more prosocial video games may also be an important component during treatment. Prevention strategies may also be implemented. Makers

of video games may employ more parental controls within the game, such as a tutorial or time settings. These controls would help to empower parents, help them to be more consistent, and, most importantly, help them to be more involved in their children's lives.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Are violent video games detrimental to minors? Do violent video games stimulate feelings of aggression and promote antisocial or aggressive behaviors? These questions plague parents, teachers, researchers, legislators, and mental health professionals, as the violent acts of juveniles continue to make headlines. Understanding the perceived effects of violent video games on minors from the perspective of parents and children who have firsthand experience playing video games can lend further insight to a topic that will continue to be evaluated. The following review of the literature will consider the factors contributing to a growing concern of the effects of violent video games on minors, as well as the barriers that parents face when mediating their children's video-game play. The following discussion addresses theoretical and research contributions relevant to this study. More specifically, this literature review focuses on (a) regulating children's exposure to mature video-game content; (b) mediation strategies that parents use to decrease exposure to violent content; (c) the third-person effect; (d) the displacement effect; (e) time spent playing video games; and (f) video-game violence.

#### **Regulating Children's Exposure to Mature Video-Game Content**

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, California proposed a law in 2005 to restrict the "selling or renting of games to minors based on legislative findings that they stimulate feelings of aggression, reduce activity in the frontal lobes of the brain

and promote violent antisocial or aggressive behaviors” (Braven, 2010, para. 3). This law was never enacted because lower courts found that it violated First Amendment rights (Braven, 2010). In 2009, the San Francisco Federal Appeals Court reported that the State had not provided credible research showing that playing violent video games was detrimental to minors and found that the law was also an unconstitutional effort “to control a minor’s thoughts” (Braven, 2010, para. 4). On November 2, 2010, the Entertainment Software Association (ESA) asked the Supreme Court to maintain the Federal Appeals Court ruling to not restrict the renting and selling of computer and video games to minors, arguing that California’s statute was unconstitutional and could lead to a hindrance of other forms of artistic expressions. The ESA argued that the current voluntary rating system provided adequate regulation and that current video games were well equipped with parental controls that allow parents to block certain games that they deem inappropriate for their children to play. To further support their argument, the ESA stated that the Federal Trade Commission provides parents with the information they need to make an informed decision about the games their children are playing (Video Game Industry and California Law, 2010). The courts have not thrown out the possibility that video games have an adverse effect on children; rather, they have shown a reluctance to legalize efforts that will restrict the sale of video games without conclusive research (Collier et al., 2008)

Policy makers’ attempts to regulate the video-game industry often consist of linking highly publicized violent crimes such as school shootings to violent video-

game use. However, these attempts are often negated because the reports often leave out other known contributors to violence (Olson, Kutner, & Warner, 2008). Other established risk factors for potential aggressive or violent behavior consist of neurological damage, attachment disorders, parental neglect and abuse, poverty, and neighborhood violence. Because these risk factors are complex and have an impact over time, it is very difficult to pinpoint one specific cause of aggressive or violent behavior (Olson et al., 2008).

### **Mediation Strategies Parents Use to Decrease Exposure to Mature Video-Game Content**

Without any formal legislation restricting the sale or rental of video games, parents must rely on themselves to monitor their children's video-game play. One such strategy parents can use to limit their sons' exposure to mature content is the rating system established by the Entertainment Software Review Board. The ESRB was successful in creating a rating system for video games, which rates violence, language, and sexual content; however, they have been unsuccessful in educating parents about their system (Felini, 2014). Felini (2014) states that the ratings themselves are not descriptive enough for parents to make informed decisions, and suggests that the only way parents can do so is to monitor their children's video-game activity.

A research study completed with Dutch parents shows the types of concerns parents have regarding video games when looking at game ratings (Nikken et al., 2007). The researchers explained that parents were indeed concerned with the type of

content their children were being exposed to. However, these concerns did not necessarily match the descriptors given by the regulatory board in Europe, the Pan European Game Information (PEGI) which is equivalent to the American regulatory board (Nikken et al., 2007). Kutner et al. (2008) held parent focus groups that examined parents' concerns about video-game ratings. Most parents who participated in the study by Kutner et al. (2008) seemed aware of game ratings, and some reported using them to make decisions, most often disallowing all Mature-rated games. However, parents had difficulty describing the type of content included in a Mature-rated game and were not able to differentiate between a Mature-rated and a Teen-rated game (Kutner et al., 2008).

When discussing other strategies that parents often use to reduce exposure to inappropriate content, some parents who participated in the study by Kutner et al. (2008) reported that their sons were only able to play video games once they had completed their homework or chores. Other parents in the same study reported co-viewing, which meant that they would watch their sons play but did not discuss the game, and very few parents discussed playing video games with their sons (Kutner et al., 2008). Most parents who participated in the focus groups facilitated by Kutner et al. said that they restricted game play on school days but were more flexible on weekends. Most parents said that they tried to limit access to content they found objectionable but felt powerless to entirely prevent their sons' access to inappropriate content. Parents reported being aware of having little control over the content of the

games that their children played with or obtained from their peers (Kutner et al., 2008).

Shepherd et al. (2006) presented a case study of three families that examined the parent–child relationship when negotiating their children’s use of the Internet, television, video, DVD, and electronic games. Parents’ overall approach to monitoring media technology was tentative and uncertain; however, they were able to come to the consensus that restrictions surrounding media technology are directly related to their children’s ages. As their children aged, less restriction and monitoring took place (Shepherd et al., 2006).

Another research study undertaken with Dutch families also examined strategies parents used to regulate their children’s video-game use (Nikken & Jansz, 2006). Nikken & Jansz (2006) identified three categories of mediation types: restrictive mediation, active mediation, and co-playing. The types of restriction strategies parents used were monitoring their children’s gaming behavior, specifying which games were appropriate, using game ratings, forbidding certain games, and gathering information about games. Active mediation included discussions between parents and children about the video games their children were playing by pointing out the pros and cons of the game content. Restrictive mediation and active mediation were more often used when the parents were more concerned about the negative effects of video games. This study revealed that parents who had little experience playing video games were more likely than parents who had more experience playing video games to use restrictive-mediation and active-mediation strategies. Co-playing

meant that the parents would play the video games with their children. Co-playing was more often used by parents who engaged in video-game play themselves and tended to have a more positive perception of the effects of video games.

Subsequently, parents who were more familiar with game content were less likely to use the content descriptors given on each game to decide what games their sons could play but were more likely than parents who had little experience playing video games to use all forms of mediation (Nikken & Jansz, 2007).

Along with focus groups conducted with parents, Kutner et al. (2008) also conducted focus groups with the participating parents' sons to examine their perspectives on video games. Most boys who participated in the study stated that their parents were not knowledgeable about video games or their own game play in particular. One participant stated, "[My parents] don't really know about my games. If they come upstairs to my room and see it, they'll say, oh that's nice, that looks like fun, or something like that" (Kutner et al., 2008, p. 87). Boys in this study seemed to have a good understanding of the types of content their parent disapproved of. Some boys reported noticing their parents' efforts to restrict or monitor games with violent content or bad language, including Mature-rated games. However, the boys stated that often the attempts to restrict their use of the games were made after the game had already been rented or purchased. Many boys validated their parents' notions about being able to gain access to games their parents would not approve of at the homes of friends and relatives. "My brother, he has friends and they sometimes had him borrow

some [M-rated] games. So we don't own them, but yes, we play them" (Kutner et al., 2008, p. 88).

### **Third-Person Effect**

Many studies both support and fight against legislation to restrict the video-game industry. The theory concerning the third-person effect is often used to support censorship. This theory explains that often people believe or perceive that others are more negatively affected by media usage than themselves (Scharrer & Leone, 2008). Scharrer and Leone (2008) conducted a study comprised of 118 sixth and seventh graders to examine the role that the established game ratings system (ESRB) had on perceived effects of video games. This study explored how the third-person perceptual opinions are formed and whether such judgments relate to attitudes and behaviors toward rules and regulations. Students were asked to use the ESRB ratings to judge the potential negative impact that a game would have on a player. Researchers hypothesized that if individuals believed that others were more vulnerable to the negative effects of media, those individuals would favor more rules and regulations to restrict access to media, thereby reducing the possibility for others to be adversely affected. Scharrer and Leone (2008) concluded that the greater the self-other perceptual gap, the greater the support for censoring or regulating the material in question. Results from this study showed that boys believed that games with a higher restrictive rating had a greater negative impact on a younger population, and, therefore, younger children should not be allowed to play it. The third-person effect was also shown in relation to the rules and attitudes of adolescents' parents.

Participants whose parents enforced more rules and expressed more concern about playing certain video games were more likely to think that video games with a higher rating could have a greater negative influence on younger-aged children (Scharrer & Leone, 2008).

Kutner et al. (2008) investigated perceptions of violent video-game influence by conducting four focus groups comprised of 21 parents who had male adolescent boys who play violent video games. Both positive and negative effects of video games were discussed during each focus group. Among the negative effects reported in the parent groups were possible desensitization to violence, potential for imitation, misinterpretation of the world as terrifying and violent, hindrance of social skills through isolation, and irritability because of excessive frustration through game play. Notably, these concerns were consistently mentioned by parent participants regarding other people's children and not for their own male adolescent children, which is also consistent with the third-person effect.

Kutner et al. (2008) also conducted four focus groups with 21 adolescent boys ranging in age from 12 to 14, and whose parents also participated in a focus group. Both positive and negative effects of video games were discussed during each focus group. Similar to their parents, the boys also mentioned the potential for games to negatively influence others besides themselves. Mentioned several times among the boys was the potential for a person to become desensitized and not think that violence is a bad thing. A common belief was that violent games would have a stronger impact on less mature youth who needed to be protected from this type of content. The boys

believed that younger children do not fully understand the consequences of their actions and may be more apt to mimic the behaviors shown within the game. However, none of the boy participants could identify an individual who had been negatively influenced in this way (Kutner et al., 2008).

### **Displacement Effect**

A common concern among parents who participated in the focus groups facilitated by Kutner et al. (2008) was the ability of their sons who played video games on a frequent basis to have well-balanced lifestyles. Kutner et al. (2008) discovered that balance concerns were mentioned by parents more often than concerns with restrictions, game content, and the possible influence games could have on their children. Parents worried that time spent playing video games replaced other important activities and could impair physical health and social skills (Kutner et al., 2008). This phenomenon is known as the displacement effect and is based on two fundamental ideas:

(1) that the relationship between time spent in one activity and another is zero-sum (time spent playing video games means less time available for another activity); and (2) that adolescents would be involved in more appropriate activities (e.g., social interactions, educational tasks) if they were not playing video games. (Cummings & Vandewater, 2007, p. 688)

Parents who participated in the focus groups facilitated by Kutner et al. (2008) discussed noticing this effect. One participant in the study described her child's behavior while playing as "zombie-like" and lazy. Another parent was concerned about a video-game player's ability to socialize with others who do not engage in video-game play. In addition, a child's ability to manage homework and maintain

good grades was a common concern (Kutner et al., 2008). Parents who were presented in the case studies by Shepherd et al. (2006) also agreed that every hour spent in front of a screen was a lost opportunity for their children to engage in a more desirable activity, such as getting outdoors, reading a book, talking with family, or doing homework. Shepherd et al. (2006) explained that new media technologies, including video games, are a new venue with which parents and children must negotiate. Boys who participated in the focus groups facilitated by Kutner et al. (2008) mentioned that balancing other activities with video games was of utmost concern for their parents, stating, “As long as I do other stuff, chores, homework, they don’t really care [what games I play]” (Kutner et al., 2008, p. 84).

Cummings and Vandewater (2007) conducted a study that examined the displacement effect by comparing the activities of those who played video games to the activities of those who did not. These researchers did not find a significant difference between the two groups on the amount of time they spent with parents, friends, or other sport or leisure activities but did find that gamers spent less time reading and completing homework. Olson et al. (2008) conducted a second set of focus groups to discuss video games with adolescent boys, which serves as a companion article to the focus groups facilitated by Kutner et al. (2008). The boys who participated in the focus groups conducted by Olson et al. (2008) often discussed how video games enhanced their social lives. Participants discussed the potential to make new friends through a common interest. Some students mentioned that they would not know what to talk about with their friends if they did not play video games.

Often playing video games appeared to foster skills in cooperating, competing, and status seeking. Video-game players often connected with many other players from different cities and countries to form teams and to compete (Olson et al., 2008). Even though parents who participated in the focus groups conducted by Kutner et al. (2008) discussed concern about their sons isolating themselves, they acknowledged that these games played a central role in their teens' social lives by trading strategies and codes with other players in addition to gaining social status when a person wins a game.

Despite widespread suggestion that playing video games may have a negative impact on academic achievement due to video games displacing time spent on homework, studying, etc. (Cummings & Vandewater, 2007), evidence has been unconvincing (Drummond & Sauer, 2014). Drummond and Sauer (2014) assert that the possibility of video games having a negative effect on academic performance is too small to be considered a problem. Adachi and Willoughby (2013) discovered that those who played strategic video games self-reported higher problem-solving skills, which may enhance a student's academic performance (Adachi & Willoughby, 2013). However, it is important to note that strategic video games are slower paced, whereas fast-paced games had no link to problem-solving skills or academic grades (Adachi & Willoughby, 2013).

### **Time Spent Playing Video Games**

In 2002, a study by the Kaiser Family Foundation revealed that about one third of all children and adolescents in the United States play video games on a daily

basis, and those who do spend a little more than an hour a day playing (Krcmar & Lachlan, 2009). Krcmar and Lachlan (2009) studied the effects of violent video games in relation to the length of time a person plays. Researchers recruited two samples of participants. The first sample was comprised of 153 participants, both males and females from 18 to 33 years old. These participants were assigned to play for 10, 15, 20, or 30 minutes and were then given a posttest to evaluate aggressive cognitions, aggressive affect, state aggression, frequency of violent game play, perceived arousal, and demographics. The second sample of participants was comprised of 21 males and females from 18 to 33 years old who did not play video games as part of the study and only took the posttest. These researchers' overall finding was that a participant's perceived arousal and actual physical and verbal aggression increased at an interval of 10 to 15 minutes but decreased the longer a person played. However, a person's aggressive cognitions did not appear to decrease with continued play. Krcmar and Lachlan (2009) postulate that, even though physical and verbal aggression decreased over time, a repeated exposure to that initial arousal may enhance long-term aggressive outcomes.

### **Video-Game Violence**

Violent video content and the influence it has on video-game players has been the most often studied aspect for video-game researchers. When parents who participated in the focus group facilitated by Kutner et al. (2008) were asked specifically about the types of violent content they were most concerned about, depictions of violence and nudity were mentioned the most. When discussing violent

content, concerns about and definitions of violence varied but centered around three interlinked issues. Parents believed that the realism of the violence, the target of the violence, and the context or goal of the violence could all play a role or help to determine the potential for harm; the more human the character, the more troubling the content became. However, their disdain for this type of content was geared more toward their sons' exposure to mature content that conflicted with their values at too young an age rather than a fear that their children would actually model the behavior portrayed in video games. Games with fantasy settings or featuring cartoon characters in farcical situations were not of much concern. Opinions about any sexual content were not as varied as the violent content; parents were collectively and strongly concerned about children's exposure to any sexual content, whether it was nudity or sexual acts. Parents voiced their concern that children often do not have the background information in order to process and differentiate between healthy and unhealthy sexual activities (Kutner et al., 2008).

Olson et al. (2008) conducted two sets of focus groups with 42 seventh- and eighth-grade boys, ages 12 to 14. Olson et al. (2008) analyzed the boys' discussion to identify what attracts adolescent boys to violent video-game content in particular. Five categories emerged as what attracted boys the most. The first reason for attraction was the lure of fantasies of power and fame; boys said that playing games with violent content gave them the ability to express their fantasies of power and glory within the game. Boys stated that they also enjoyed imagining what they would do if they were given the abilities of a favorite game character. Boys liked to imagine

how they would use these abilities to manage conflicts or problems they came across in their own lives. The boys who participated in this study also discussed how, even though the fantasies portrayed in the games were alluring, they were aware that the actions of their favorite characters would have very different consequences in the real world. Discussion concerning arrests, jail, and just getting into trouble were all mentioned as possible real-world consequences (Olson et al., 2008).

The second most prominent cluster of reasons boys were attracted to violent video games was the challenge, action, excitement, and more in-depth development of characters than other types of games offered. Many participants discussed how violent video games take time to advance to a new level and have more adventure in them than nonviolent types of games. However, boys stated that the realism of a game was another attraction, and if a game was nonviolent but was realistic in its graphics and sounds, they would like it (Olson et al., 2008).

The third category of reasons boys were attracted to violent video games was that they used violent video games as a way of coping with feelings of anger or frustration. Video games served as a good distraction from every-day irritants and were another outlet for boys to vent their anger. Several students mentioned role playing their real-life conflicts in the games. One participant in particular said that playing a violent game helps to avoid a physical altercation. Taking out his anger on the game and getting a sense of winning the fight made him feel better (Olson et al., 2008).

The fourth theme that emerged from the focus groups conducted by Olson et al. (2008) was that boys used violent video games as a way to socialize and said that they help to facilitate discussion among friends. One particular boy mentioned not knowing what else he would talk about with his friends if he didn't play video games. Finally, many of the boys discussed meeting other boys from different cities or countries to play with or against. The last theme Olson et al. (2008) discussed as a reason boys were drawn to violent video games was to learn new skills. This theme centered around sports games where boys stated that sports video games inspired them to try a new sport or influenced them to imitate certain physical activities in real life. Last, boys stated that playing a sports video game could improve their coordination by repeatedly practicing the sports movements in real life.

In the focus groups conducted by Kutner et al. (2008), parents mentioned curiosity, control, and excitement among the reasons they thought their sons were attracted to violent video games. A mother participant discussed how her son wanted to see the blood and guts, stating that, in one of the games he played, her son was curious about what color the dragon's blood would be when he cut its head off. "It's something that in his world you don't see in real life" (Kutner et al., 2008, p. 90). Another mother participant suggested that violent video games employ a more analytical thought process as opposed to sports games and "Mario-type" games where the players do not have the ability to change their strategies or objectives. In the violent video games, a player can change his or her objective and strategy. Some parents observed their children using violent video games to cope with stress or to

work out their anger, while others stated that violent video games triggered their sons' anger.

A review of previous research has demonstrated an overall lack of understanding when it comes to adolescents' video-game play and has established the reason a more in-depth conversation with both parents and adolescents is warranted. Concerns on the part of parents and researchers may be outweighing their ability to perceive any positive effects and may also be hindering their ability to communicate effectively with adolescents who do play. In order to expand the knowledge related to this subject, this researcher will duplicate the study completed by Kuter et al. (2008) to further examine the effects of video games through the perspectives of the adolescent boys who play them and through the perspectives of their parents. The following chapter will present the research design outlined by Kutner et al. (2008) as well as the methods of the study. The instruments and procedures this researcher used to collect the data will also be presented.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

With the evolution of technology, many Americans now possess a personal gaming system, in addition to video games, which can be played on computers or hand-held devices. Since policy efforts have focused on limiting the access of adolescents to mature and inappropriate game content, little qualitative research has been published to include parents' perspectives on video games with mature or violent content. Parents may also find it useful to understand how their concerns may be similar to or conflict with those of their children. This study was intended to increase a person's understanding of video games and how they are affecting the daily functioning of the individuals who play them. The purpose of this study was to provide perspectives from both parents and sons to help educate parents who are raising adolescents in a world where video games have become a large part of our culture. This researcher replicated a study completed in 2008 by Kutner, Olson, Warner, and Hertzog, including their research questions, which helped guide this study. The four major questions that guided this research were:

1. What are parents' concerns about their sons' use of video games and of games with violent content in particular?
2. What do boys believe their parents think about video games and what do they believe are their parents' concerns regarding video games with violent content?
3. Why do parents think their sons play video games?

4. What influence do boys believe violent video games have on their lives or on the feelings and behaviors of other children?

### **Research Design**

The focus of this research was to provide a better understanding of how parents' and their male children perceived the effects of their video-game usage and to apply this information to current legislative proposals, outreach programs, classrooms, and mental-health settings. Since little is known about the perceptions of actual game users, this study was exploratory. An exploratory design is used to explore a topic or to provide a beginning familiarity with it (Rubin & Babbie, 2008). Currently, there is considerable research about the effects from violent video games on thoughts, feelings, and behaviors but relatively few qualitative studies examining the effects of video games from the perspectives of the players and their parents. The type of design that was used for this study was a qualitative research design that emphasized depth of understanding and the deeper meanings of human experience and aimed to generate theoretically richer observations (Rubin & Babbie, 2008).

For this study, focus groups were conducted with male adolescents and were asked in-depth, open-ended questions in order to learn more about how adolescent boys perceive that video games influence their lives. Individual interviews were conducted with parents of boys who played video games. They were asked in-depth, open-ended questions in order to learn how parents perceived the effects of video games and what kinds of information might be helpful for them to make more informed decisions when buying and monitoring their children's video games. The

method of conducting individual interviews instead of facilitating a focus group with parent participants differed from the method Kutner et al. (2008) used. This change was made because the researcher for the current study was unable to schedule a time that worked for all parent participants.

### **Sampling Plan**

Participants in this study were recruited using nonprobability sampling strategies. Nonprobability sampling results in a nonrandom sample that is not scientific or precise and was selected by the researcher (Rubin & Babbie, 2008). Two types of nonprobability sampling were utilized to recruit the target population. These included purposive sampling and snowball sampling. The first strategy was purposive sampling, which means that the participants needed to meet specific criteria in order to take part in the study (Rubin & Babbie, 2008). Because this study explored the perceptions of male adolescents and their video-game usage, the student participants needed to meet the following criteria: (a) be an adolescent male who was 14 to 18 years old and who played video games at least 2 hours a week, and (b) needed to have played two or more Teen-rated (for ages 13 and older) or Mature-rated (for ages 17 and older) games (using ratings assigned by the ESRB). Students were instructed to go home and check the ratings of their favorite games before deciding to participate.

This researcher was employed at the high school as a school-based counselor and was given permission from the school principal to present and conduct this study with students enrolled in two psychology courses. Therefore, this researcher gained access to the participants through two different psychology classes at a public high

school in Manteca, California. This researcher sent home the informed consent letters with these students. The parents received two informed consent letters, one for them to sign and return giving permission for their child to participate, and the other to keep so they had with the researcher's contact information (see Appendix).

The second participant group in this study included 8 parents or guardians who had children who played video games. The strategies used to recruit adolescent boys were also used to recruit the parents and guardians. Because this study explored the perceptions of parents and their sons' video-game usage, parent/guardian participants needed to meet the following criteria: (a) be a parent or guardian of a male who was 14 to 18 years old who played video games at least 2 hours a week, and (b) their son needed to have played two or more Teen-rated (for ages 13 and older) or Mature-rated (for ages 17 and older) games (using ratings assigned by the ESRB). Similar to the process above, the parents received letters that were sent home with the students from the psychology courses, informing them about the study and requesting their participation. The letters also provided the researcher's contact information, so interested participants could contact the researcher directly. This researcher described the above criteria to potential parent participants during the initial phone call to schedule an interview.

All participants were recruited using a second strategy called snowball sampling, which requested participants to refer other individuals who met the criteria to participate in the study (Rubin & Babbie, 2008). Once a participant met the criteria and agreed to participate, the researcher requested that the participant refer other

parents and adolescent boys to be a part of this study. A sample size of 10 adolescent boys and 10 parents or guardians seemed most appropriate for this study because having any more than 20 participants was unmanageable. This researcher was unable to contact two of the parents; therefore, only 8 parent participants were included in this current study.

### **Data Collection**

This researcher conducted one part of this qualitative research using two focus groups comprised of 5 male adolescents in each. According to Rubin and Babbie (2008), focus groups are carefully planned discussions used to capture participants' perceptions of a defined area of interest. New ideas, which would not have occurred during an individual interview or by individuals completing a questionnaire, are often stimulated as participants in focus groups begin to interact about the chosen issue (Rubin & Babbie, 2008). These two groups consisted of adolescent males who were 14 to 18 years old. Research data were collected through group interviews. The data were collected using semistructured, open-ended questions. The researcher used open-ended questions because it allowed the participants to respond to the questions in their own words and led to opportunities for further exploration and probing (Rubin & Babbie, 2008). Data for this research study were collected, with the participants' permission, using a combination of both audio tape recordings and notetaking methods in order to fully capture the responses. This researcher had a nonthreatening assistant help take notes on a flip chart to identify themes and to

promote further discussion. Each focus group lasted approximately 1 to 1½ hours and took place after school in the career center.

The second part of the study included individual interviews with parents and guardians who had a male adolescent, age 14 to 18, who met the requirements for this study. The data were collected using semistructured, open-ended questions. Data for these interviews were collected, with the participants' permission, using a combination of both audio tape recordings and notetaking methods in order to fully capture the interview. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes to 1 hour and took place after school in this researcher's office on the school campus.

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher reviewed the paper transcripts, checked the original audio tape recordings to confirm meaning, and coded responses to the research questions. The researcher also made marginal notes about recurring themes or comments. In order to analyze the data obtained from the interview, all data were transcribed into narrative form. The researcher utilized Neuman's (2003) plan for qualitative data analysis to analyze the data. Using Neuman's (2003) plan, the data were organized into themes and categories in a five-stage process that included sorting and classifying, open coding, axial coding, selective coding, and interpreting and elaborating. During the first stage, sorting and classifying, the data were organized around the research questions. In the second stage, open coding, critical terms, key events, or themes were identified and sorted guided by the literature and the participants' language. In the third stage, axial coding, the data were examined again to see if any additional themes

emerged. During the fourth stage, selective coding, data went through a final review in order to identify cases and quotes that illustrated specific themes. In the fifth stage, interpretation and elaboration, major themes and categories were compared and contrasted to the existing literature, resulting in the formation of concepts and a working theory.

### **Protection of Human Participants**

Participants in the research study were informed by the researcher about the purpose of the study upon initial contact. Participants in the study were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could choose to withdraw from the research study at any time without penalty. The researcher also informed the participants that refusal to participate in the research study would not result in any penalties. This helped to ensure that participants did not feel coerced into participating in the study. Parents must also have given written consent in order for their sons to participate in the study. Upon agreement to participate in this study, the researcher provided informed consent forms that provided further information, explaining the research study as well as participants' rights (see Appendix). The consent form informed the participants how their identities would be protected and also stated how the data would be recorded and used. The researcher explained to all participants that their identities would not be revealed in the research study at any time. They were also informed that all findings in the research study would be shared in an aggregate and would not be shared individually to protect the identities of the

participants. This researcher also emphasized that all information would be protected from inappropriate disclosure under the law.

The participants were informed that the data would be kept in a locked cabinet at all times. The researcher also informed the participants that all tapes would be erased and notes and transcripts would be destroyed 1 year after the completion of the study. To protect vulnerable participants, all participants were provided with phone numbers of resources that they could access in case such discomfort occurred. Participants who experienced distress could contact Family and Youth Services of San Joaquin County at 209-929-6700 or call the 24-hour Family Crisis Line at 1-877-643-4750. Participants were also provided with names and phone numbers of the researcher and the researcher's advisor in the event that they had further questions or concerns regarding the research study.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of parents who have male adolescent children who regularly engage in video-game play and of the male adolescent children of these parents. In order to gather this information from parents, individual interviews were conducted and six semistructured questions were asked. The interviews were conducted in private at Sierra High School in Manteca, California, in this facilitator's office. In order to gather this information from the male adolescents, two focus groups, comprised of 5 male adolescents in each, was facilitated. Each focus group lasted approximately 1 to 1½ hours, and four semistructured questions were asked. The focus groups were conducted in private at Sierra High School in the career center.

This chapter reports on the results of this study. Following the demographic information is the summative presentation of the parents' perspectives of their children's video-game use, the behaviors these parents believe are directly related to their children's video-game usage, and regulations and prevention strategies parents are using to reduce their children's exposure to content they disapprove of. Following the report of parents' perspectives, this researcher presents and summarizes the male adolescents' perspectives. This includes reporting adolescents' beliefs about what their parents' thoughts are concerning video games and the types of behaviors the adolescents believe are directly influenced by their video-game play. This interviewer

compared the thoughts of the parents to the thoughts of their children regarding the types of games the adolescents liked to play. Each research question was individually addressed by this researcher.

### **Demographic Information of Interviewees**

The first group of participants was comprised of 8 parents or guardians of male adolescents between the ages of 14 and 18 who played video games at least 2 hours per week. The sons needed to have played two or more Teen-rated (for ages 13 and older) or Mature-rated (for ages 17 and older) games (using ratings assigned by the ESRB). The sons also needed to have participated in this researcher's focus group. The second groups of participants in this study were 10 adolescent male students between the ages of 14 and 18 who self-identified as playing video games for at least 2 hours a week and whose parents also participated in this study. Boys needed to have played two or more Teen-rated (for ages 13 and older) or Mature-rated (for ages 17 and older) games (using ratings assigned by the ESRB). The students were requested to go home and check the ratings of their favorite games before deciding to participate.

### **Finding Related to Research Questions**

#### **Parents' Concerns about their Sons' Use of Video Games**

The findings of this study are organized according to the research questions. Analysis of the first research question, which asked about parents' concerns related to their sons' use of video games in general and of games with violent content, revealed three primary areas of parental concern. These included (a) the content of the video

games, (b) the ability to restrict the use of certain violent video games, and (c) the balance boys had between video-game play and other activities.

**Content Concerns.** All 8 parents mentioned concerns regarding video-game content that focused on violence. All parents were concerned with the way the content of games conflicted with their family values and feared that children would imitate the behaviors depicted in the video games. The more realistic the game, the more the parents thought the game would have a negative impact on their children. Parents believed that the more realistic the violence was in the game, the more it could increase the likelihood that their children would have difficulties distinguishing between reality and fantasy. One parent expressed this well, stating,

Call of Duty—I don't like him to play often because I don't want him to think that that is an acceptable way of life. I mean, I know war is a reality, but at the same time, I don't want to have him think that is okay.

Only one parent mentioned an objection to violence against women, stating, "I think a lot of that stuff is degrading to women, and it would give them the wrong perspective on how women should be treated. I don't want them to get wrong idea of what sex is like." Three parents specifically mentioned being concerned about desensitization to violence, which they believed could impact their sons' likelihood to imitate those behaviors. One parent described witnessing this desensitization and stated,

He will watch things on TV, and it does not really affect him or faze him. He watches UFC or will go online and look at stuff that repulses me, and it doesn't even faze him. It's like no big deal and an every-day thing.

**Ability to Restrict.** The second area of concern for parent participants related to the parents' ability to control their sons' access to certain games that may conflict

with their family values. Parents discussed ways they attempted to limit access in their homes. The main strategy identified was restricting access by not buying certain games for their sons; however, they admitted that they could not monitor what their sons played outside of their homes. Parents mentioned older siblings and even their spouses purchasing games for their sons without their consent. Seven out of 8 parents expressed concern over their ability to control access to the games their sons played. One parent articulated this nicely, stating,

We don't buy them. He doesn't really ask because he knows. We will talk about it and what we will buy. We regulate his time. He goes to sleep at night. The game system is not in his room. That's really all we can do. If he is at a friend's house, there is not much you can do other than knowing where and who he is with and knowing that he is not always going to the fun house.

Of the 7 parents who mentioned difficulties restricting access to certain video games, 3 of them discussed other family members buying games for their sons without the parents' consent or without talking with them about it first. One parent who struggles with this stated,

A lot of the video games he purchased with his money by having his older brother buy them for him. So we get into conflict over the fact that it was their money that purchased it and not mine; therefore, it is his property and not mine.

With the main strategy identified by parents to restrict their sons from certain video-game content being not buying games they did not approve of, this researcher can assume that the parent participants included in this study may have had little experience playing video games themselves. This researcher came to this conclusion by comparing these results to the research Nikken et al. (2007) conducted where

researchers found that parents who had experience playing video games with their sons were less likely to rely on content descriptions of games and, instead, used mediation strategies such as co-viewing and discussing video games to impact adolescents' access to or understanding of content rather than relying on a restrictive approach. As our current generation of video-game users become parents, we will more than likely see more forms of mediation strategies being utilized.

**Balance Concerns.** Five out of 8 parents indicated that their greatest concern was not about game content but, rather, about the amount of time their sons spent playing these games. Parents thought their children isolated themselves too much, leading to other areas of life being neglected. Parents expressed concern about video games becoming more of a priority than socializing with family and friends, getting exercise, and being even more important than education. One parent expressed this concern stating, "He does not always get his homework done, and sometimes it seems like getting to the next level on the game is more of a concern than passing his English class." Parents in this study also recognized that their sons played video games as a way of socializing with their friends. When asked why they thought their sons played video games, one parent stated,

He will call his buddies after school and tell them he is getting online. A lot of his friends will meet and talk while playing. I think it's something he does with his buddies as they razz him. He is online talking to his friends like I would have been at the mall years ago.

This demonstrates that parents do not seem to support the amount of time their sons spend playing video games but are open to the possibility of video games being a way for their sons to build their social skills.

### **Boys' Beliefs about what their Parent's Thoughts Are Concerning Video Games**

The second research question asked what boys believed their parents' thoughts were about video games and what they thought their parents' concerns were regarding video games with violent content. Analysis of this question revealed three major themes: (a) the rating system, (b) balance concerns, and (c) content concerns.

**Rating System.** Seven boys stated that their parents were not aware of or did not look at game ratings. These boys stated that their parents would disapprove of the game when it was already in their possession. This may actually mean that the ratings provided on the game itself are hard for the parents to conceptualize. One boy highlighted this theme by saying,

My mom doesn't really care. The only thing I can remember my parents getting mad at was when I was playing Grand Theft Auto. I ran over a cop, and he said some pretty crazy things. My dad ripped out the game and broke it in half.

Another boy answered similarly about his parents' reactions to games with content they did not approve of but also confirmed this study's parents' suspicions about their sons accessing certain games through friends, when he stated,

My mom and dad never knew about the rating, so they didn't care, but I remember one day I brought Grand Theft Auto Vice City over from a friend's house. When you load the game, they show a girl with a bikini on, and when my mom walked in, she said, "What are you looking at? You need to return that game." When she returned it, she told the other parent to "watch out what you are giving out."

Based on these findings, it is clear that boys had access to game content through their peers that their parents would not approve of. This confirms the concerns of the parents who participated in this study and their knowledge of the difficulties they face when prohibiting game content they did not want their sons being exposed to.

**Balance Concerns.** When the boys were asked what their parents' concerns were about video games, three boys reported that their parents were worried that video games would become more important than other aspects of life. However, boys put more of an emphasis on isolation, explaining that their parents thought video-game play took time away from socializing with family or that their parents thought the adolescents were attempting to escape conflict or chores. One boy stated, "I think my mom would say I play video games because I don't wanna clean or do something productive." Another boy added, "I think that she would think that I am doing it to get away. She thinks I am addicted to it, which is funny because you can't be addicted to something that you don't have withdrawal symptoms to."

The boys who participated in this study acknowledged their parents' concerns about video games hindering a well-balanced lifestyle but disagreed with their parents, stating that video games can help to maintain balance. Six boys stated that playing video games can enhance a person's social life. Three of the 6 boys stated that playing helped them to keep in touch with friends from their previous hometowns. Boys in this study did not mention video games helping them to socialize

with family, to get adequate exercise, or to place importance on their education, which were all very important to their parents.

**Content Concerns.** The boys in this study were knowledgeable about their parents' concerns regarding the kinds of content their parents would disapprove of. The boys most often mentioned that their parents were worried that the adolescents might imitate a character's behaviors taking place in the video game. Boys also stated that their parents thought the more realistic the video game, the more likely the boys would emulate those behaviors. Boys mentioned that blood and gore, the sounds of gun shots, and games that depicted similar events currently taking place in our world were of utmost concern for their parents. Three boys in this study explained that their parents were too quick to judge the games they played and strongly suggested that boys knew the difference between the types of behaviors depicted in video games and how those behaviors would not be acceptable in the real world. One boy articulated this by saying,

A lot of parents come to the conclusion that playing video games changes your mindset. Especially with violent video games. They think that video games make us violent or make us less sensitive. I don't agree with that. I think parents should give video games more of a chance.

### **Parents' Thoughts about why their Sons Play Video Games**

The third research question asked parents to discuss what they believed attracted their sons to violent video games. Two themes emerged. The first theme was that video games helped their sons to relax; the second theme was that video games provided entertainment and a way for their sons to socialize with friends.

**Relaxation.** When parents were asked why they thought their sons played video games, 4 parents acknowledged that video games were a way for their sons to relax and unwind at the end of the day. One parent stated, “He says to relax and get away from stress and hang out with friends.” Another parent related her son’s video-game play to herself, stating, “Probably for the same reasons I play computer games. It’s just mindless, thoughtless, something that you can do, a way to relax and not have to worry about anything.”

**Entertainment and Socialization.** Three parents mentioned video games being a source of entertainment for their sons. Despite concerns regarding isolation, 3 parents acknowledged that playing video games was a way for their sons to connect with their friends, some noting that it raised their sons’ status in their group of friends. One made the following comment:

I think he uses it as entertainment. I know some of the games he plays, he thinks he is good. He likes his skill level, and he likes to show it off and show how good he is at it. I know he liked to play for that reason but mostly for entertainment when he is bored.

Another parent stated that she did not necessarily like it that her son was sitting in his room but acknowledged the socialization aspect, stating that, for her son, it was a way to connect with friends from his old town. Interestingly, this parent also stated that playing video games was a way for her son to stay away from drugs and alcohol:

He tells me there is nothing else to do since we moved here. He basically tells me, “people drink and do drugs out here,” and that is why he is more focused on these games that involve his old friends and the type of environment he is used to.

Since both boys and parents who participated in this study answered very similarly, we can assume that parents have a good understanding about why their sons are attracted to video games.

### **Boys' Perceptions of the Influence of Video Games**

The last research question aimed to examine what boys thought about the influence that violent video games had on their lives and on the feelings and behaviors of other children. Two themes emerged from the boys' discussion. The first theme was the positive influence the games could have on their social lives. The second theme was that violent video games could desensitize a person.

**Social Lives.** Six boys stated that playing video games can be a very social activity, and they believed these games enhanced their social lives. Three boys talked about how these video games helped them to keep in touch with friends from their previous hometowns. Some admitted that individuals could become isolated if all they did was play by themselves but none admitted it happening to them first hand. One participant said,

Video games help sometimes because you can talk to friends you normally cannot talk to because they aren't around. I think it depends on how much you play the game and if you play to escape, which can really affect a person's social life.

Another participant discussed how playing video games did not affect his need or desire to hang out with his friends in person, stating,

On my X-Box Live and PSN network, you are still socializing on that. I don't think that affects real-life socializing either. I play video games all the time, but if a friend calls me to go out or something, I will go out.

**Desensitization.** Boys answered similarly to their parents about the ability for violent video games to desensitize a person. Five boys stated that video games could distort a person's response to violence in reality but did not think that video games would influence them. Boys repeatedly stated that people who blurred the lines between reality and the violence depicted in the games were more often younger children whose parents did not monitor their children's play and people with a mental-health disorder. One participant explained his thoughts by saying,

It's just how people are before they even play a video game. The video game brings it out in them. Or, that the kid just copies everything that they see, and they just don't get it. As a parent, you gotta let them know you can't be doing that.

Another participant discussed how video games did not have an effect on him, stating,

Look at me, I'm normal. There's nothing different about me. The games don't affect me at all. They are just fun to play. It's not like I'm gonna go around killing people. I am not a violent person at all. Not unless they are wack jobs, I think it can also somewhat affect younger kids.

### **Summary**

A review of this qualitative data showed that parents of adolescent boys have strong opinions and concerns about their sons' use of video games. However, there was not a wide array of mediation strategies parents chose to employ when attempting to monitor their sons' use of violent video games. Boys seemed to have a good understanding of their parents' concerns about balance, content, and influence but had little concern about their own exposure. Last, parents did not seem to fully understand the rating system that has been established by the ESRB. Further

exploration and research is needed to enable parents to have a better understanding of the games their children are playing. With more information, parents will be able to expand their toolbox of strategies when attempting to monitor their children's exposure to violent content.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

This purpose of this study was to increase the understand of parents, sons, clinicians, and policy makers regarding video games and to explore how video games are affecting the daily functioning of youth, especially those who play violent video games on a regular basis. An exploratory qualitative study was conducted with two different groups of participants. The first group of participants was comprised of 8 parents or guardians of adolescent males who played video games at least 2 hours a week and who participated in this study. The second group consisted of 10 adolescent males who were 14 to 18 years old, who identified themselves as playing video games at least 2 hours a week, and whose parents participated in this study. The information gathered was analyzed to find major themes in an attempt to answer the guiding questions of this research.

This chapter summarizes the major findings of the study in the context of the Kutner et al. (2008) study and other cited in the literature. This chapter also discusses the implications for social work practice and policy, discusses the limitations of the study, and makes recommendations for future research.

#### **Major Findings**

The first research question focused on the types of concerns parents had about their children who were playing video games with violent content. The most common theme was that of concerns related to violent video-game content. All parents were

concerned with the way the content of the games conflicted with their family values and feared that children would imitate the behaviors depicted in the video games. Parents believed that the more realistic the violence, the more it could increase the likelihood that their children would have difficulties distinguishing between reality and fantasy. In this study, there was no consensus on any specific type of content parents disapproved of but more of a general concern about the realism of the violence and the potential for their son to imitate those behaviors in real life. Additionally, parents mentioned the possibility of violent video games desensitizing their sons to violence and reported concerns about how their sons might react when faced with violence in real life. These findings are consistent with Kutner et al. (2008), whose parent participants also thought that the realism of violence could have the most potential for harm.

The boys in this study were knowledgeable about their parents' concerns. The boys most often mentioned that their parents were worried that they might imitate the characters' behaviors taking place in the video games. Furthermore, these boys also stated that their parents were concerned that the more realistic the video game, the more likely the boys would emulate those behaviors. Boys mentioned that blood and gore, the sounds of gun shots, and games that depicted similar events currently taking place in our world were of utmost concern for their parents. However, boys in this study stated that their parents were too quick to judge the games. These boys strongly suggested that they knew the difference between the types of behaviors depicted in video games and what be acceptable in the real world. This finding is consistent with

Olson et al. (2008), whose adolescent participants also acknowledged that actions taking place in video games would have very different consequences in the real world.

Boys participating in this study also admitted that video games could distort a person's response to violence in real life but did not think that these violent video games would influence them directly. Boys shared that younger children whose parents did not monitor their children's video game play or individuals with a mental health disorder were more likely to blur the lines between reality and fantasy. This finding aligns with Kutner et al. (2008), whose participants also viewed younger video-game players as more susceptible to harmful effects. However, parents in this study were more likely than parents who participated in the focus groups facilitated by Kutner et al. (2008) to admit witnessing their sons becoming more desensitized to violence in real life. This finding fits the third-person-effect theory because boys who participated in this current study did not admit to being directly affected by their video-game play. Sharrer and Leone (2008) hypothesized that, if individuals believe that others are more vulnerable to the negative effects of media, those individuals may favor more rules and regulations to restrict access to media, thereby reducing the possibility for others to be adversely affected. Two boys in the current study specifically mentioned restricting or enforcing a higher level of monitoring of younger children's video-game play. An example of this in the current study was stated by son number five, who said, "The video game brings it out in them. Or that the kid just copies everything that they see and they just don't get it. As a parent you

gotta let them know you can't be doing that." Based on the findings from this research study and past research, it seems that boys have a clear understanding of their parents' concerns but do not agree with their parents, often denying any negative influence on themselves.

The second greatest theme related to the parents' ability to control their sons' access to certain games that may conflict with their family values. Parents discussed ways they attempted to limit access in their homes. The main strategy parents used was not buying certain games for their sons, but they reported that they could not monitor what their sons played outside of their homes. Parents mentioned older siblings and even their spouses purchasing games for their sons without their permission. These findings are also consistent with Kutner et al. (2008), who found that parents expressed difficulty trying to monitor their children's game play. Parents who participated in the focus groups facilitated by Kutner et al. (2008) said that they tried to limit access to objectionable content but felt powerless to entirely prevent their children from being able to access inappropriate content. One way parents expressed a lack of control was their children having access to games through their peers.

In this study, even though parents mentioned not buying games they disapproved of, these parents did not specifically report using the rating system provided by the ESRB. However, parents who participated in the focus groups conducted by Kutner et al. (2008) did seem aware of the ESRB ratings and some reported using them to make decisions about what games to allow, often disallowing

all Mature-rated games. However, when Kutner et al. asked parents about particular content that could be found in Mature-rated games and how they differed from Teen-rated games, parents had little comprehension of the types of content that would be found (Kutner et al., 2008). In the case studies presented by Shepherd et al. (2006), parents' overall approach to monitoring media technologies was tentative and uncertain. The findings from these three studies make it difficult to have an overall understanding of the strategies parents use to reduce their children's exposure to video-game content that the parents disapprove of. A difference of attitude toward video-game content has been found between parents who viewed video games as having a more negative than positive impact versus parents who viewed video games as having a more positive than negative impact on their children (Nikken et al., 2007). According to the Internet surveys analyzed by Nikken et al. (2007), parents who played video games themselves and those who played video games with their children had a more positive outlook on the effects of video games; they were also less likely to use the content descriptions, and they used a wider array of mediation strategies other than simply not buying them.

Interestingly, 7 out of 10 boys who participated in this study stated that their parents were not aware of or did not look at the ratings to determine what they could not play. Boys in this study stated that their parents would disapprove of a game after the game was already in the boys' possession rather than before. This finding could mean that parents have limited knowledge and understanding about video-game ratings and what these ratings truly mean. Limited parental knowledge about ratings

is consistent with the research that Felini (2014) conducted, which indicates that the ratings themselves are not descriptive enough for parents to make informed decisions.

The last theme related to the first research question was that of children needing a well-balanced lifestyle. Parents thought their children isolated themselves too much, neglecting other areas of life. Parents expressed concern about video games becoming a priority over socializing with family and friends, getting exercise, and participating in education. These findings are also consistent with the research completed by Kutner et al. (2008), who found that parents worried that the amount of time spent playing video games was replacing other important activities and could impair the physical health and social skills of their children. Shepherd et al. (2006) found that parents thought that every hour spent in front of a screen was a lost opportunity for their children to engage in a more desirable activity, such as getting outdoors, reading a book, talking with family, and doing homework. According to the Internet surveys conducted by Shepherd et al. (2006), parent participants revealed that, as their adolescents got older, it became difficult for the parents to negotiate the time their sons spent playing video games. Despite most concerns leaning toward the negative aspects of video-game play, parents in the focus groups facilitated by Kutner et al. (2008) acknowledged the potential positive role of video games in their teens' social lives, suggesting that they understood how beating the latest game could increase their sons' social status. The idea of video games enhancing a boy's social life seems to appear throughout this research study as well as throughout the focus

groups Olsen et al. (2008) conducted, where boys mentioned socializing with other players who lived in different cities or countries. According to the boys who participated in the focus groups facilitated by Olsen et al., when meeting new friends, the topic of video games allowed them to initiate conversation.

Parent concerns from this present study about video games displacing other important activities are not consistent with some research. Cummings and Vandewater (2007) found no difference between boys who played video games and boys who did not play video games when examining the amounts of time boys spent with parents or friends or the time they engaged in sports or leisure activities. Even though parent concerns regarding academics were validated by Cummings and Vandewater (2007), who found that gamers spent less time reading and completing homework than nongamers, parents' concerns were not validated by Drummond and Sauer (2014) or Adachi and Willoughby (2013), who asserted that video games do not negatively affect gamers' academic performance.

When parents were asked why their sons played video games, the most common response was that it was a way for their sons to relax and unwind at the end of the day. Three parents in this current study acknowledged that socializing with friends was also a reason their sons played. According to the research completed by Kutner et al. (2008), parent participants were much more specific than the parents who participated in this current study when discussing their sons' interest in video games. These parents mentioned curiosity, control, and excitement as reasons their sons played video games. Boys who participated in this current study most often

stated that they played for entertainment and social reasons. Olson et al. (2008) concluded from their data that five categories emerged when boys were asked what attracted them to video games, and answers were much more in depth than they were in this study. Since both boys and parents who participated in this study answered very similarly, we can assume that parents have a good understanding about why their sons are attracted to video games. In past research, parents did not seem to fully understand the allure of video games and may have, in fact, underestimated the allure.

### **Implications for Social Work Practice**

Parents, clinicians, teachers, and social workers need to have adequate knowledge about how video games may be hindering or helping an adolescent's ability to have a well-balanced lifestyle since video games can be a huge part of an adolescent's life. In order to fully assess adolescents' overall wellness and to aid in developing appropriate strategies, it would be helpful for those involved to understand both the strengths and weaknesses associated with video-game play. Parental education about video games is lacking in our society. The purpose of this study was to provide perspectives from both parents and sons to help educate parents raising adolescents in a world where video games have become a large part of our culture.

Findings from the current study show that parents have a very limited toolbox for mediating their sons' video-game use. For example, parents often stated that the main way to restrict their sons' access to certain video games was by not purchasing those games. None of the parents discussed co-playing, which can possibly help

parents have a more positive view and a better understanding of video games, as noted in the study by Nikken et al. (2007). If parents, social workers, and clinicians took more time to play video games or even to watch an adolescent play video games, the adults' knowledge would increase. This increase in knowledge would, in turn, increase the likelihood that an open and honest discussion could take place.

Findings from this current study suggest that parents generally have a negative view of video games and their consequences. Parents participating in this study were able to acknowledge some positive socialization aspects, but none described any of the positive aspects that other researchers have examined. One such example discussed in the literature review was that playing video games can enhance problem-solving skills (Adachi & Willoughby, 2013). An educational or outreach program could potentially help parents understand possible positive and negative effects associated with playing video games.

The third-person-effect theory held up in this research study. Boys did not acknowledge video games having an effect on them but were worried about younger children being more vulnerable. However, without hard evidence to support the notion that video games cause harm to children, policy will continue to struggle to regulate the video-game industry. Outreach and educational programs for adolescents could discuss both positive and negative aspects associated with playing video games. Because media outlets often associate video games with violence such as school shootings, boys may perceive only negative consequences as being extreme, therefore concluding that a lack of extreme reactions indicates no negative consequences are

present. A more informed balanced view of positive and negative aspects could be beneficial.

Gaining a better understanding of what attracts adolescents to violent video games may help mental-health clinicians to establish rapport with their clients who engage in video-game play. The current research shows that adolescents often feel the need to deny negative consequences associated with video games, which may thwart honest and open discussions. When clients feel less defensive, they may, in turn, be more open to self-reflection and more willing to make a change in their habits. Clinicians and social workers can also assist parents to better understand their children's interest in video games and help model a discussion that does not create a defensive environment. This education may also help parents and their children gain mutual respect for each other's interests.

### **Limitations of the Research**

The major limitation of this study was the sample size. This research was limited to one high school campus and only to students enrolled in a psychology course. Based on the sample size, the finding from this research cannot be generalized to all parents and their sons and should not be over-interpreted.

This researcher did not specifically ask participants how many hours a week they spent playing violent video games, because boys in this study only needed to have played video games 2 hours a week. Additionally, previous research has shown that one third of adolescents play video games for at least 1 hour per day (Krcmar &

Lachlan, 2009), so these findings should not be generalized to all adolescent boys who play violent video games.

Another limitation was the propensity for adolescent boys to try to impress one another with their responses. The current study used focus groups to gather data from the adolescents, and boys may not have felt comfortable expressing their true feelings about how video games might be influencing them in a negative way given that there were other boys in the room. Participant boys may have been worried about their reputation with their peers. Often boys in the focus group answered questions very similar to one another. Therefore, some boys may not have answered questions with true intent.

Given the pace at which the video-game industry is evolving and that the data collected in the current study are 4 years old, results may be quite different if collected today. Therefore, findings cannot be generalized to today's parents and adolescents but can be used to formulate more appropriate interview questions based on more recent research findings.

### **Recommendation for Future Research**

Several recommendations for future research are suggested by this researcher. The primary recommendation is to conduct a follow-up quantitative survey regarding the findings of this study and include more specificity as to the total number of hours adolescent participants spend playing violent video games each week. Using a quantitative method could increase the sample size and could allow researchers to compare and contrast different participant sets for the purposes of generalizing the

results. Using a survey to study any self-perceived negative effects could help boys feel more comfortable answering questions honestly, since adolescent boys seemed to feed off one another in a group setting and may help to confirm whether the third-person effect is, in fact, supported. A follow-up qualitative study could also be done with individual interviews of adolescent boys, which, again, may encourage a more honest response.

This research study took place in a small city, which has limited options for outdoor activities. Recommendations for future research include conducting a study with a more diverse group of participants to consider whether results might differ based on demographic variables such as gender, income, education, and region. Since participants in this study all came from the same school, lived in the same city, and had a similar educational background, it would be interesting to examine the lifestyles of adolescents who lived in areas where there was more to do.

Further research could examine how media, such as news stories, may influence the third-person effect and perceived displacement effect. Since many of the adolescent participants in the current study did not report any direct negative influences from violent video games, it would be interesting to see if the news media influences perceived effects. Researchers may be able to identify whether or not the news media is a factor since parents were concerned with video games displacing other important activities. Because previous research does not necessarily confirm that, the news media could also be shaping parents' ideas about how their sons are being negatively affected by violent video-game use.

Another area for further exploration involves American policy and procedure related to the regulation of video games. Public policy tends to look only at the effects of Mature-rated games. Teen-rated games seem to be disregarded and may pose a potential risk due to the unrealistic portrayal of violence. Teen-rated games often do not show consequences to violence like Mature-rated games do. For example, Teen-rated games have dead bodies that will dissolve and disappear, or the blood is absent or colored blue when a character is injured (Kutner et al., 2008). Previous research has identified that exposing the real-life consequence of violence may decrease the possibility of imitation (Kutner et al., 2008).

### **Conclusion**

In spite of what is often reported about the effects of violent video-game use, this current study has found that, as a whole, video games appear to be misunderstood. Despite the often researched negative effects, there are potentially many positive effects of playing video games as well. Since the likelihood of any public policy restricting the sale of Mature-rated games is slim, parents must rely on themselves to monitor the games their children play. It is clear that parents have difficulty monitoring the games their children play; however, if more parents took the time to play video games with their children, more parents may be able to gain a better understanding of them. Because the video-game industry continues to grow, it is imperative that parents, researchers, social workers, clinicians, teachers, and public-policy developers gain a more well-rounded perspective on the effects because a condemnation of video games simply is not working.

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## APPENDIX

## APPENDIX

## Informed Consent Forms

## Parents

I, Lindsey Troglia, am a student in the Master of Social Work Program at California State University, Stanislaus and am doing a research study for my Master's thesis. Your participation is being requested for this study with the point of learning more about video games, what more you as a parent would like to know and your perception of how video games affect your son and other children who play video games. If you decide to volunteer you will be asked questions about your sons video game usage, and what you think attracts them to certain games. Interviews are expected to be between thirty to sixty minutes in length.

There will be no benefit to you other than the possibility of being able to use your answers to help legislation form policies, and to further help you, and other parents understand their son's interest in video games. The information I collect from you will be protected from inappropriate disclosure under the law. I will audio tape the interview with your permission and take notes. All these audio tapes and notes will be kept for one year after I complete the study and then all notes and transcripts will be shredded and audio tapes will be erased. When I report the information of the study I will not use your name or connect your name to your response.

Your participation is voluntary. If you decide not to participate in this study or choose to drop out of it at any time there will be no penalty. You can also choose to not answer any question you do not want to answer. If you have any questions about this study please contact me Lindsey Troglia by e-mailing me at [—]; calling me at [—]; or by calling my Thesis Chair, Shradha Tibrewal, at (209) 667-3951. If you have any questions about your rights as a human participant, please contact Campus Compliance at 667-3747. Thank you for considering participating in this study. Your time and input is appreciated.

Student's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone number where you can be reached: \_\_\_\_\_

Optional (Check box if applicable):

I choose to volunteer *without* the interview being audio recorded.

## Students

I, Lindsey Troglia, am a student in the Master of Social Work Program at California State University, Stanislaus and am doing a research study for my Master's thesis. Your participation is being requested for this study with the point of learning more about video games, and your perception of how they affect yours and others lives. If you decide to volunteer you will be asked questions about your video game usage, and what attracts you and your friends to them. You will be in a group of other students to discuss this topic, and will last approximately one to one and a half hours.

There will be no benefit to you other than the possibility of being able to use your answers to help legislation form policies, and to further help your parents understand your interest. The information I collect from you will be protected from inappropriate disclosure under the law. I will audio tape the interview with your permission and take notes. All these audio tapes and notes will be kept for one year after I complete the study and then all notes and transcripts will be shredded and audio tapes will be erased. When I report the information of the study I will not use your name or connect your name to your response.

Your participation is voluntary. If you decide not to participate in this study or choose to drop out of it at any time there will be no penalty. You can also choose to not answer any question you do not want to answer. If you have any questions about this study please contact me, Lindsey Troglia, by e-mailing me at [—]; calling me at [—]; or by calling my Thesis Chair, Shradha Tibrewal, at (209) 667-3951. If you have any questions about your rights as a human participant, please contact Campus Compliance at 667-3747. Thank you for considering participating in this study. Your time and input is appreciated.

Student's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Student Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Optional (Check box if applicable):

I choose to volunteer *without* the interview being audio recorded.