Inducing attitude change toward online gaming among adolescent players based on dissonance theory: The role of threats and justification of effort

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Abstract

The negative impact of online gaming on adolescents has received much attention. The question of how to reduce their pathological use of online gaming is a critical issue. Based on the concept of external justification in dissonance theory, this experimental study aimed to examine whether severity of threat and justification of effort would impact adolescent players' attitude change toward online gaming and their subjective estimations of online gaming addiction. The results echoed predictions from classic studies in dissonance theory. When participants engaged in attitude–discrepant behavior, i.e., persuading other adolescents that an apparently interesting online game is not fun at all, their attitudes toward online gaming shifted more dramatically to the negative side in the context of a low level of threat rather than a high level of threat. Additionally, the magnitude of attitude change was more prominent when participants exerted more rather than less effort to engage in attitude–discrepant behavior. Moreover, a similar pattern of participants' evaluations of the likelihood of online gaming addiction was also observed. The findings show that dissonance theory has the potential to be useful for inducing adolescent players to disengage in online gaming.

1. Introduction

The Internet has profoundly affected the lives of many human beings, and certain negative effects in this respect have emerged, most noticeably the effect of Internet addiction (Chen, 1998; Chou, Chou, & Tyan, 1999; Chou & Hsiao, 2000; Greenfield, 1999; Griffiths, 2000; Kandell, 1998; Tsai & Lin, 2001; Young, 1996, 1998). Given that online gaming has become one of the most addictive activities on the Internet, addiction to online gaming among adolescent players has received much attention (Chen et al., 2005; Griffiths, Davies, & Chappell, 2004; Ko, Yen, Chen, Chen, & Yen, 2005; Shieh & Cheng, 2007). Extant research has shown that excessive online gaming can lead to various social problems. In separate surveys of Taiwanese online gamers, Chen et al. (2005) discussed online gaming-related crimes such as theft and fraud, while Lo, Wang, and Fang (2005) highlighted how increased online gaming has led to deteriorating interpersonal relationships and increased levels of social anxiety in college-age online gamers. Ng and Wiemer-Hastings (2005) showed that young online gaming addicts displayed symptoms similar to substance addiction, including dropping out of school as well as family and relationship problems.

Previous studies on online gaming have mainly addressed the psychological motives of such addicts (Choi & Kim, 2004; Hsu & Lu, 2004; Kim, Park, Kim, Moon, & Chun, 2002; Wan & Chiou, 2006a, 2006b; Wan & Chiou, 2007), the profiles of gamers (Chen et al., 2005; Chou & Tasi, 2007; Griffiths et al., 2004; Ko et al., 2005; Lin & Tsai, 2002; Whang & Chang, 2004; Yang & Tung, 2007), and the negative impact of violent video games (Ballard, Hamby, Panee, & Nivens, 2006; Kirsh, Olczak, & Mounts, 2005; Persky & Blascovich, 2007; Weber, Ritterfeld, & Mathiak, 2006). In contrast, research focused on changing adolescent players' attitudes toward online gaming has been relatively rare. Online game players' attitudes may play a critical role in shaping motives and determining the nature of their involvement and addictive behavior. Attitudes that are more readily accessible in the memory influence behavior more strongly (Chiou, 2008; Kraus, 1995); thus, attitude change may be an appropriate approach by which to shed light on possible treatments for adolescent online gaming addiction. Therefore, when considering interventions for the pathological use of online games by adolescents it is crucial to determine how adolescent players with addictive inclinations can be motivated to change their attitudes toward online gaming.