

Research Statement

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As I have progressed as a social scientist, I have come to understand the value of applying quantitative research methods in the study of social phenomenon. For me, the way to truly understand human communication is through the rigorous application of the scientific method. Thus, I have worked diligently to develop theoretically-sound programs of research with the stated goal of understanding the psychology behind media entertainment.

Generally, my interests in entertainment media are primarily driven by a fascination for understanding how people use their leisure time. As our society continues to modernize, the amount of leisure time available to the average person has dramatically increased, and thus scholarly attention to the role of leisure in society has become increasingly important. As far back as the early 20th century, Hart (1925) noted that:

“the eight-hour work day is now the accepted working day in almost all industries. That leaves eight hours in which people may follow their own pursuits. It is a matter of concern in a democracy what those pursuits shall be” (pp. 111).

The driving force behind my interest in media entertainment is that I want to understand why and how people pursue leisure activities, activities thought by Aristotle to bring us closest to happiness (c.f. Arnold, 1989). Moreover, I want to understand the role of entertainment media as a leisure activity, and the possible functional role of enjoyment as a possible indicator for psychological well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Finally, I want to understand how using entertainment media affects our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Over the last three years, my research interests have resulted in over 20 conference papers and handful of journal publications and book chapters, with many others in preparation for publication in various journals. My research to date can be broken into two general programs of research focused on either (a) explaining media choices or (b) identifying variables that affect the media consumption experience, with a specific interest in video games. Importantly, I have had success in the past securing funding to conduct experiments in both of these research programs.

In terms of explaining media choices, My dissertation work is an extension of selective exposure theory to explain motives behind video game play. Bryant and Davies (2006) write that research on the motivations behind video game uses are scant, and research applying SET to video games is virtually non-existent. My dissertation addresses this research gap by extending the theory to explain and predict exposure to video games. The eventual goal of this line of research is to understand comparative selective exposure processes, such as identifying the conditions under which individuals would choose some forms of media over others. Given the increasingly diverse set of entertainment options available to today’s consumer, this line of research is increasingly compelling, as it begins to empirically delineate potential differences between media that may explain differential uses and effects observed in extant literature. Other research of mine on media use includes work on the differential appeal of violence in films and video games (Skalski, Bowman, Eden, Maloney, & Lange, 2007; in preparation for *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*), the role of personality in video game addiction (Huh &

Bowman, 2008), gender differences in appeal of public arcade games (Bowman, Eden, & Grizzard, 2008), and the role of cognitive skills on game ability as an explanation for gender differences in video game play (Sherry, Rosaen, Bowman, & Huh, 2006).

In terms of the media experience, my preliminary research project was an application of social facilitation theory to video game playing (Bowman, Tamborini, & Sherry, 2008; in preparation for *Media Psychology*). This study found a significant effect of audience presence on video game performance, based on dominant cognitive skill responses. The study was well received at ICA Montreal 2008, and I am in the process of designing a replication of this study to extend the findings in a virtual environment to see if the presence of virtual audiences has a similar impact on game performance as the presence of actual audiences. This replication is particularly relevant to video games today, as on-line gaming has exploded in recent years, introducing mass virtual audiences to the traditional gaming environment. Other work on the media consumption experience has looked at factors involved in establishing one's emotional attachment to and identification with video game characters (Lewis, Weber, & Bowman, 2008), the influence of cognitive skills on game enjoyment and presence (Bowman & Boyan, 2008; Sherry, Rosaen, Bowman, & Huh, 2006), the role of extrinsic game challenge on game enjoyment via flow (Bowman & Sherry, 2006), and the role of community in the on-line gaming experience (Schultheiss, Bowman, & Schumann, 2008).

I have been able to secure funding for my research, having received two internal Michigan State University research grants totaling \$11,000. These grants have allowed me to purchase upgraded computers, software programs, and specialized measurement devices – including real-time heart rate monitoring equipment and unobtrusive screen capture software (to measure selective exposure in real-time) – so that I can continue to conduct high-quality experiments. The grant-writing experience has been a learning process, but I am confident that I can continue to receive internal and external funds for my research programs.

Primarily, I consider myself an experimentalist. The bulk of my research takes great care to carefully explicate theoretically-relevant constructs so that they can be experimentally manipulated in order to test predicted outcomes. However, I also feel that at times it is important to step back and simply 'look under the microscope', especially in areas where contemporary theories may not offer sound or valid explanations for observed phenomenon (for example, the often-discussed empathy paradox in that some theories of enjoyment cannot explain the appeal of negatively-valenced entertainment media; Zillmann, 1991). In these circumstances, I feel strongly that inductive reasoning can be useful in helping create new theory from observed phenomenon; at the very least, it can help us create testable situations in which old and new logics can be compared. Thus, by striking a balance between the strict experimentalist and the curious observant, I hope to further our understanding of the psychology of entertainment media, and I strive to reflect this epistemology in my scholarly work.

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