Advertising in violent video games results in poor recall, negative brand perception

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Embedding advertisements in violent video games leads to lower brand recall and negative brand attitudes suggesting advertisers should think twice about including such ads in a media campaign, according to researchers at The University of Texas at Austin.

Women in particular responded negatively to ads placed in violent video games.

The study, the first to confirm the link between increased video game violence and impaired in-game ad effectiveness, was authored by College of Communication researchers Seung-Chul Yoo, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Advertising, and Jorge Peña, assistant professor in the Department of Communication Studies. It appears in the July/August issue of *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*.

"Although violent video games are very popular and can reach a young, highly engaged audience, their effectiveness as an advertising medium is questionable," said Peña. "Our study demonstrates that featured violence diminishes brand memory and primes more negative attitudes toward the brand."

As part of the study, participants played one of two video games with embedded advertisements. The violent video game featured computer-operated avatars holding guns and shooting at the participant as he or she navigated through virtual rooms drenched in blood. In contrast, the non-violent video games featured the same avatars holding nothing and the

virtual rooms were soaked in water.

The video games were identical in every detail except for the presence or absence of violent cues, such as avatars holding guns. After navigating the game, participants were asked to recall some of the brands advertised in the games and to share their perceptions of those brands.

Brand recall and recognition, and attitude were significantly lower for participants who navigated violent video games compared to those who navigated the non-violent video games.

Women that played the violent video game developed even more negative brand attitudes than women exposed to the non-violent video game (11.29 percent decrease in brand liking). This could be attributed to women typically having less experience playing violent video games, or men — who typically play more violent video games — being desensitized to the violence and not noticing it, according to the study.

Yoo and Peña believe violent content in video games not only draws players' attention, but diverts it from other sources of information in the game, thus limiting players' mental capacity to process in-game ads. Additionally, the suggestion of violence in the form of blood and gore results in players subconsciously linking negative attributes to in-game ads. This echoes the way violent TV programs hamper ad recall relative to nonviolent TV programs, according to previous studies.

"Advertising campaign planners would do better to spend their budget on ads embedded in nonviolent video games than in ads placed within violent video games; particularly if they are trying to reach women," said Yoo.

The popularity of video games — nearly all American teens and half of all American adults play computer, console or mobile phone games —

makes them an attractive advertising medium. According to eMarketer Inc., U.S. video game advertising spending is expected to reach $1 billion next year.

Provided by University of Texas at Austin