


# Moral Disengagement Strategies in Videogame Players and Sports Players

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## ABSTRACT

Research in the area of video game play and sports psychology has suggested that specific strategies are often employed by players to justify aggressive behaviour used during gameplay. The present study investigates the relationship between game play and moral disengagement strategies in a group of 605 adults who played violent videogames or regularly played competitive sports. The results suggest that sports players were more likely than violent game players to endorse moral disengagement strategies. The video gamers were more likely to use a specific set of moral disengagement strategies (i.e., cognitive restructuring) than the other groups and this may be related to the structural characteristics of videogames. The findings add to recent research exploring the mechanisms by which individuals engage in aggressive acts both virtually and in real-life situations. The results are discussed in relation to similar relevant research in the area, along with recommendations for future research.

## KEYWORDS

Aggression, Competitive Sports, Moral Disengagement, Sports, Video Game Play

## INTRODUCTION

There has been much research exploring the impact of violent content in videogames on young people in terms of aggressive cognition, behaviour, and affect (for reviews, see Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Anderson, Anderson, Shibuya et al., 2010; Ferguson & Kilburn, 2010; Hollingdale & Greitemeyer, 2014). Recent research has suggested that the element of competition in a game, rather than the violent content, may explain the negative effects of exposure to violent videogames (Adachi & Willoughby, 2011; Waddell & Peng, 2014). In both virtual and real-life competitive environments, there is

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evidence of aggression, cheating, and disrespect in relation to sporting environments (e.g., Boardley & Kavussani, 2007; Corrion, Long, Smith & d'Arripe Lougueville, 2009; Caliskan, 2013). In violent videogame play (e.g., Bastian, Jetten & Radke, 2012; Gabbiadini, Andrighetto & Volpato, 2012, Gabbiadini, Riva, Andrighetto et al., 2014), it has been argued that players may justify any such negative behaviour, and while the levels of aggression across these two settings may not be similar in content, they can represent a violation of personal standards of acceptable behaviour, and can create a personal dilemma for players.

Recent research (e.g., Gabbiadini, Andrighetto & Volpato, 2012, 2014; Hartmann, Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2014; Richmond & Wilson, 2008; Wang et al., 2017) has explored the role that cognitive distortions (e.g., moral disengagement) may play in making media violence more acceptable to individuals. The present study is designed to build on this, and to explore if Bandura's (1991, 2001) Theory of Moral Disengagement provides a useful framework for understanding the willingness and ability to engage in virtual aggression, whilst comparing this process with a similar process in a competitive real-life environment (i.e., with sports players). Moral disengagement (MD) may therefore be seen as a cognitive mechanism facilitating gamers to act aggressively in game settings, but may also be associated with a reduction in concern for victims of such acts. Moral disengagement and moral considerations are key elements of Bandura's (1991) Social Cognitive Theory of Moral Thought and Action. The concept of moral disengagement refers to a set of cognitive mechanisms that are part of a self-regulatory internal process. These psychosocial processes are believed to inhibit moral standards and prevent one from engaging in behaviour that is contrary to one's moral behaviour standards.

## **Moral Disengagement**

Moral standards, moral emotions, moral identity, and moral justifications are important in understanding behaviours that involve aggression towards others (Perren & Gutzwiller-Helfeninger, 2012; Teng, Nie, Guo & Yanling, 2017). Research indicates that individuals report experiencing guilt and unease when encountering virtual violence (Weaver & Lewis, 2012), which is similar to the feelings individuals may experience when they witness real life violence. Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory of Human Agency (1991, 1996) argues that moral standards are part of a self-regulatory process that ensures individuals evaluate any intended behaviour in terms of potential consequences for individuals. Moral standards are therefore key elements of the theory and any violation of these standards results in feelings (of guilt) which can prevent the intended behaviour from occurring. The theory also argues that a disinhibitory social cognitive process can be employed making it easier for individuals to act in negative ways, as individuals are freed from censure and potential guilt (Hymel, Rocke-Henderson & Bonanno, 2005). According to Bandura (1991; 2001), cognitive mechanisms can be selectively activated to escape self-evaluations and self-sanctions, and can explain how individuals will commit acts that violate their internal standards but also explains the methods that individuals use to justify such acts.

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