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How the Media Contextualize Computer Games: A Comparative Analysis of the U.S. and Korean Game Coverage*

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Abstract

Whereas game addiction has attracted scholarly and practical attention, there are ongoing controversies over the causes and consequences of addictive game playing especially among adolescents. In order to investigate how computer games overall and game addiction in particular are contextualized in the media, this study conducted a comparative content analysis of the United States of American (U.S.) and South Korean game coverage between 2011 and 2013. The findings show the press in both countries most often depicted the issue of computer games in terms of business and industry, while dealing with the possible costs and risks associated with excessive game playing to a much lesser degree. This tendency was more prominent in the Korean press. The Korean media contextualized computer games in a more positive light than their U.S. counterparts. These results indicate that the current game coverage has a pro-industry tendency. The media need to focus more on consumer-related issues and perspectives particularly for the welfare of young audiences.

Keywords*: Game coverage, Computer Games, Game Addiction*

1. Introduction

Scholars have suggested many protective and risk factors related to teenagers' anti-social behavior [1]. The media, along with some psychological, familial, and social factors, have been named as a risk factor that has potential to facilitate youth deviancies. Various types of media, especially the Internet, in fact dominate teenagers' leisure activities [2].

Notably, adolescents most frequently use the Internet for game playing, and game addiction has become one of the most controversial social-psychological issues. There is, however, still little consensus over the meaning or the diagnosis criteria of game addiction [3]. Furthermore, scholars have disagreed over how pervasive pathological game playing is among adolescents and what kinds of consequences excessive game playing may entail [4].

Amid these scholarly debates, the media have often blamed computer games or excessive game playing for increasing teenagers' anti-social behavior. The media hysterically respond to the issue of game addiction, rather than investigating the phenomenon in scientific and comprehensive ways [5]. The media's moral panic toward the harmful effects of computer gaming might have created unnecessary fear among the public. Analyses of how the media actually portray computer games may reveal the popular understanding of game playing and related issues. Against this backdrop, this study compares the U.S. and South Korean press coverage of computer games in terms of primary themes and aspects, affective tones and overall frames.

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2. Theoretical Background

Some scholars have argued that game addiction can be considered a new type of mental disorder that may lead to a variety of psychological, social and health-related problems [6]. According to a recent meta-analysis, however, previous studies have largely disagreed over the consequences of game addiction [4]. While problems associated with excessive or addictive gaming has attracted attention from the public, media, and policy sectors, little empirical research has systematically examined how the media discourse contextualizes these issues.

Some have pointed out that the media tend to overestimate the proportion of addicted game users among the population with a heavy focus on some mal-effects [5]. At the same time, the media tend to contextualize the economic aspects of the game industry in a positive light [7]. That is, the media apply double standards in depicting computer games; they exaggerate the harmfulness of game playing for the youth while projecting the promising future of the game business.

According to a study of popular magazines' discourse of video games, both utopian and dystopian frames co-exist in the media coverage [7]. Utopian frames portray game playing as a healthy form of alternative leisure activities, which may help people discharge aggressive desires. Positive, rather than negative, consequences are more highlighted in these frames. Dystopian frames, on the contrary, suggest that game playing may have hypodermic effects on aggression and other problematic behavior especially among young audiences.

Since the media discourse both reflects and influences the public's understanding of computer games and relevant issues, this study attempts to explore the game coverage in terms of 1) primary themes, 2) primary aspects (particularly regarding the consequences of game playing), 3) affective tones, and 4) overall frames.

3. Methodology

To address the research interests discussed so far, we conducted a comparative content analysis of the U.S and South Korean press coverage of computer games [8]. Specifically, we chose two prestigious newspapers in each country: the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* in the U.S. and the *Choong-Ang Daily* and *MK Business News* in South Korea. To identify most relevant articles, we used such keywords as computer games, online games, mobile games, video games, and social games.

Through this process, we located a total of 240 articles and 128 articles for the U.S. and South Korean press, respectively. The study period was between January 2011 and December 2013, and the unit of analysis was each news article. Two trained coders analyzed the articles in terms of the following coding categories: Primary themes, primary aspects regarding the consequences of game playing, affective tones, and overall frames.

Primary themes refer to which aspects or attributes of computer games were most underscored in a given news story. Given that there is a severe controversy surrounding the effects of game playing, we analyzed the types of consequences that were mentioned in the game coverage. Affective tones refer to the news media's evaluative approach toward computer games or game playing (*e.g.*, negative, positive, or neutral tones). Finally, overall frames refer to the interpretive perspectives by which the news coverage contextualized game-related issues. As some prior studies have suggested [9], the following categories were considered major frame types: attribution of responsibility, economic consequences, morality, human interests, and conflicts.

4. Results and Discussion

According to Table 1, the press in both countries most often depicted the issue of computer games in terms of business and industry. In contrast, the possible risks, costs or

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negative consequences associated with computer games were dealt with to a much lesser degree. Particularly, the U.S. press rarely mentioned the word 'game addiction'; they preferred to use such words as excessive game playing. While a total of 17.1% of the U.S. coverage focused on computer games as cultural and creative activities, its Korean counterpart less frequently covered those themes. The proportion of regular game reviews was also much higher in the U.S. press than the Korean press.

Table 1. Primary Themes of the U.S. and Korean Game Coverage

Types of themes	The U.S. Press	South Korean Press
Game business & industry	41.7%	60.2%
Games as cultural contents and creative activities	17.1	7.0
Regular games reviews	18.8	6.3
Costs, risks, negative consequences	4.6	4.7
Benefits and positive consequences	5.4	0.8
Legal & policy aspects	7.1	7.8
Scientific and academic findings	0.4	0.8
Other	5.0	12.5
Total no. of articles	240	128

Table 2 reports the types of consequences associated with game playing mentioned in the game coverage. The majority of the coverage in both countries did not mention any kinds of negative consequences that excessive game playing might cause. The U.S. media reported on the potential effects of game playing on various anti-social behaviors more often than the Korean media, but they rarely addressed the problem of game addiction.

Table 2. Negative Consequences of Game Playing

	The U.S. Press	South Korean Press
Negative displacement (time/financial losses)	1.7%	2.3%
Economic ineffectiveness, costs, & failures	6.7	2.3
Health related risks (obesity, addiction, *etc.*)	2.3	1.6
Social risks (destroying relationships, *etc.*)	2.2	1.6
Increasing anti-social behavior	5.6	0.8

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Other negative consequences	2.8	3.9
Not mentioned	84.2	87.5
Total no. of articles	240	128

The Korean press mentioned some financial costs associated with computer gaming more frequently than its American counterpart. We also found some differences between the two countries in terms of the positive consequences of game playing depicted in the media discourse (See Table 3). Specifically, the U.S. press underscored the educational effects of game playing (*e.g.*, developing some physical and intellectual skills) more than the Korean press. A significant portion of the game coverage in both countries focused on some economic benefits at the industrial level, but the proportion of such news articles was much higher in the Korean media.

Table 3. Positive Consequences of Game Playing

	The U.S. Press	South Korean Press
Positive displacement	1.7%	0.0%
Valuable leisure activities	1.7	1.6
Educational effects	8.4	0
Improving social relationships	1.7	0.8
Industrial and economic benefits	26.3	45.7
Other positive consequences	2.5	2.9
Not mentioned	57.7	52.0
Total no. of articles	240	128

Regarding the affective and evaluative tones of game coverage, it appears that the Korean press presented the topic of computer games in a more positive light than the U.S. press (See Table 4).

Table 4. Affective Tones of the U.S. and Korean Game Coverage

	The U.S. Press	South Korean Press
Negative tones	6.3%	6.3%
Neutral tones	81.7	61.7
Positive tones	12.1	28.1
Total no. of articles	240	128

The majority of U.S. coverage contextualized game-related issues in a neutral manner. The *New York Times* ran more negative stories of computer games than the *Wall Street Journal*. When it comes to the overall frames of game coverage, the news media in both countries revealed a largely similar pattern; they utilized the ‘economic-consequences’ frame most frequently (See Table 5). But the proportion of the economic frame was much

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higher in the Korean press. The 'human interests' frame was the second most prominent in the U.S. coverage.

Table 5. Overall Frames of the U.S. Game Coverage

Types of frames	The U.S. press	South Korean Press
Attribution of responsibility	2.1%	3.1%
Economic consequences	27.5	68.0
Morality	0.0	1.6
Human interests	19.2	3.1
Conflicts	5.0	3.1
other	0.0	2.3
Non applicable	46.3	18.8
Total no. of articles	240	128

5. Conclusion

Contrary to some scholarly criticism, the U.S. and Korean press did not show the tendency to overestimate the potential mal-effects of game playing without sufficient scientific rationales. While concentrating on business and economic aspects of computer games, the media in both countries dealt with the possible costs, risks, and negative consequences associated with excessive game playing to a limited degree.

That is, the game coverage in the two countries represents industrial viewpoints and issues more often than consumers' concerns and interests. While game playing has increasingly dominated our leisure time particularly among the youth, the media do not appropriately address possible social problems that can be generated by excessive or addictive gaming. These results indicate that the current game coverage has a pro-industry tendency. In that regard, the media need to focus more on consumer-related issues and perspectives particularly for the welfare of young audiences, arguably the heaviest users of computer games.

Acknowledgments

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