

Parental Controls Off in Google Play Store: Sexualisation of Female Characters in Video Game Advertisements

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ABSTRACT

Video games are a form of entertainment in today's society, and people across all ages can access the games mainly through Google Play Store. When the family setting is not switched on, all video games may become accessible regardless of content ratings. However, video games may contain sexualised contents that are harmful and misinform people about sex, especially among children, which may lead them to practice unsafe sexual practices as they grow towards adulthood. Further, the advertisements from the video games may also have sexualised contents to attract consumers, though this aspect has not been extensively researched. Drawing on the concern of misinforming children about sex through video game advertisements, this research seeks to observe if sexualisation occurs in video game advertisements based on the games identified in Google Play. An observational descriptive study where 30 video games from Google Play Store are identified and their advertisements are analysed using content analysis. Findings reveal that sexualisation does occur, especially in female characters, and certain scenes may misinform children about the notion that sex sells, and they will potentially become young adults who practice unsafe sexual practices. Parents must manage the type of video games accessible on children's phones, and deliver proper education about sex to their children.

Keywords: Video games; video game advertisements; sexualisation; family setting

INTRODUCTION

With the advancement of technology, today's mainstream media is now regarded as modern and it has been prevalent not only on television but also on social networking websites (Aksar & Firdaus, 2021; Cabeza-Ramírez et al., 2021; Du, 2022; Karsay et al., 2018; Zakaria & Adnan, 2022). The continuous modernisation of digital technology has made media even more popular than in the 1970s, especially where there is a growth of video games with features that would seem to be impossible before (Beck & Rose, 2018; Ferguson & Colwell, 2020; Karsay et al., 2018; Liu, 2018; Slater et al., 2017). Liu (2018) has highlighted the notable features in the development of present-day video games: (1) Sceneries and cut scenes that are increasingly film-liked and (2) in-game characters and avatars becoming realistic. Similarly, Beck and Rose (2018) have mentioned that video games are part of the elements that make up the modern culture people practice today. Skowronski et al. (2021) mentioned that today's video games allow users to be in full control of the characters that may reflect their personality and identity as the designs allow them to be fully immersed in the virtual environment.

PROBLEM STATEMENTS

It is undeniable that video games have become a popular entertainment across the community and the growth in video games is impressive to the extent that people of all ages have access to these games regardless of time zone or geographical difference (Cabeza-Ramírez et al., 2021; Noël et al., 2021; Skowronski et al., 2021; Slater et al., 2017; Tang et al., 2019; Zakaria & Adnan, 2022). Presently, much of the video games are available on the Google Play Store, an application on smartphones that displays a wide range of video games with a variety of categories available. By simply tapping into the application, presently in 2022, there are a total of 17 categories of video games available for users to download video games on their smartphones. These 17 categories of video games are listed in alphabetical order as follows: Action, Adventure, Arcade, Board, Card, Casino, Casual, Educational, Music, Puzzle, Racing, Role Playing, Simulation, Sports, Strategy, Trivia, and Word.

One of the ways to promote video games is through the use of advertisements, or ads in short as Gramazio et al. (2021) placed it. Presently, many media critics have criticised that advertisements are increasingly sexualised (Alam et al., 2019; Burnay et al., 2018; Gramazio et al., 2021; Law et al., 2020; Oniku & Joaquim, 2021; Reichl et al., 2018; Skowronski et al., 2021). While there are many ways to advertise such as through the use of humour, emotions, and fears as appeals to customers (Law et al., 2020), using sex has become one of the most appealing ways to attract customers and it is now considered a culture in the consumer community (Alam et al., 2019; Oniku & Joaquim, 2021). In video game advertisements, advertisers would sexually objectify women in such a way that the visuals highlight sexually suggestive actions and behaviours to upsell the products and further attract the consumers (Gramazio et al., 2021; Law et al., 2020; Oniku & Joaquim, 2021; Reichl et al., 2018).

Addressing the occurrence of sexualised video game advertisements, while there is a substantial amount of research conducted on sexualised advertisements (see Alam et al., 2019; Gramazio et al., 2021; Law et al., 2020; Oniku & Joaquim, 2021; Reichl et al., 2018; Slater et al., 2017; Tang et al., 2019) and sexualisation in video games (see Burnay et al., 2018; Driesmans et al., 2015; Karsay et al., 2018; Liu, 2018; Noël et al., 2021), there is yet research that has specifically looked into the video game advertisements that are available in smartphone applications. Further, no literature has looked into the video game advertisements from Google Play as the researchers have observed that several Google Play video game advertisements are sexually suggestive. The occurrence of these sexualised video game advertisements must be addressed as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) reported that there is a drastic increase of children under 15 who are using the Internet on their smartphones, subsequently increasing the chances of exposing these vulnerable children to highly inappropriate or potentially harmful contents online (UNICEF, 2017). Given a large number of games available in the Google Play Store, and in a situation where Parental Setting is not switched on, it becomes a concern that children are at risk of viewing these contents.

In fact, the video games that are previously researched such as *Grand Theft Auto* (Beck & Rose, 2018; Ferguson & Colwell, 2019), *The Sims 4* (Skowronski et al., 2021), *Ultra Street Fighter IV* (Burnay et al., 2018; Noël et al., 2021), *the Story of Arado* (Driesmans et al., 2015), *Lara Croft* (Liu, 2018; Near, 2013), and *Dream Date Dress Up* (Slater et al., 2017) are available in gaming companies' websites and none is made available yet in Google Play Store. This enlarges the gap in the lack of research on Google Play Store games not only in terms of the gameplay experience but also in the advertisements of these games on social media. As an endnote, Reichl et al. (2018) with reference to Goffman's Gender Advertisement have argued that media contents have sexual aspects that are largely ignored and left unrecognised because they do not challenge the underlying sexual assumptions of the people.

Finally, when users are exposed to sexualised contents from childhood, as they gradually grow up to young adults, they may begin to engage in pornography which will lead

them to practice unsafe sexual practices (Ali et al., 2021; Cabeza-Ramírez et al., 2021). Cabeza-Ramírez et al. (2021) have also mentioned that the exposure to sexualised contents will lead to uncontrollable viewing of pornography. Following the exposure to various kinds of media, with video games included, studies have previously found that university students are sexually active as they have been eager to experience the sexual practices seen in media (Ali et al., 2021; Lyu et al., 2020; Tan et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2022). Evidently, Malaysia was globally ranked as the fourth in terms of viewing pornography, and a large number of teenagers and adolescents contributed to this rank (Tan et al., 2022). While Zakaria and Adnan (2022) warned that young adults could develop unhealthy addiction to video games under constant usage of smartphones, and subsequently deteriorate their physical and mental health, scholars (see Ali et al., 2021; Liu, 2018; Lyu et al., 2020; Tan et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2022), who researched on sexualised contents, warned that the tendency for young adults to be diagnosed with human immunodeficiency viruses (HIV) and acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) was higher as they were eager to practice the sexual behaviours seen in media.

Concerning the aforementioned research problems, the research thus seeks to identify the video game advertisements on Google Play and observe if any sexualisation has occurred in these video game advertisements.

SEXUALISATION OF WOMEN IN VIDEO GAMES

Video games are widely recognised as a form of entertainment today and they are especially prevalent among youths (Liu, 2018; Noël et al., 2021; Tang et al., 2019). Despite the popularity of many video game industries, such popularity occurs among the male audience (Tang et al., 2019). While Burnay et al. (2018) have mentioned that video games imply sexually suggestive content, Skowronski et al. (2021) have reassured the presence of these sexualised contents where females are indeed sexually objectified. To the researchers' observation, video game industries have been advertising the games on social media platforms. While there remains no explicit literature on sexualised video game advertisements, the notion of "sex sells" as termed by Alam et al. (2019) in the field of marketing and advertising does exist. Alam et al. (2019) have further highlighted that most media today advertise products with sexualised content even though there is no logical relationship between the two. Law et al. (2020) have highlighted that despite the sensitivity, sex remains a crucial element in marketing products through advertisements but unbeknownst to the public, the sexualised advertisement comes with several negative consequences. Typically, sexualised advertisement results in sexual objectification.

SEXUAL OBJECTIFICATION

Sexual objectification refers to the objectification and instrumentation of women where their values are appreciated if they desire sexual characteristics (Burnay et al., 2018; Karsay et al., 2018; Liu, 2018; Skowronski et al., 2021). Karsay et al. (2018) have further added that sexual objectification is not always objectifying the sex of any individual but rather, the presence of the individual must be constantly created, maintained, improved, and presentable to others. For example, women must be continuously presented as attractive figures while men must constantly be muscular. In the designing of female characters in video games, Liu (2018) stated that the designs created are meant to sexually objectify female characters as objects to attract more players into playing the game. In an example provided by Liu (2018), in the popular *Tomb Raider* series where Lara Croft, the classic character is frequently sexually objectified. Her in-game designs are sexually objectified in an exaggerated manner and research has found that many male players have sexually fantasized about her. Liu (2018) further highlighted that in the advertising poster of the eighth *Tomb Raider* series, Lara Croft is portrayed as a figure

where her face is not shown to the public audience but rather, only her large breasts and sexy abs. Similarly, in Near's (2013) research, he described Lara Croft as a character with oversized breasts who looked like a Barbie Doll for attractive purposes. In video games that require the players to customise the character's looks, sexual objectification also occurs where the characters tend to have sexually suggestive costumes that are often unrealistic (Beck & Rose, 2018; Skowronski et al., 2021). This is also certainly true as Beck and Rose (2018) reported that many female characters in games are often partially nude.

Other than the sexually physical depiction of female characters, several games have made their in-game female characters into sexually active characters. In the popular game *Grand Theft Auto*, female characters are involved in prostitution, work as strippers, and are frequently sexually molested (Beck & Rose, 2018; Ferguson & Colwell, 2019); when the player who is a male protagonist manages to date a female character, it usually ends up with the character having sex with the female character. In Beck and Rose's (2018) review of literature on sexualised video games, they cited *RapeLay* and *Custer's Revenge* as video games that directly portray sexual assaults to the players. In both games, the ultimate goal is disturbing as they involve raping the female characters.

ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

Among the video games mentioned in the literature, they are categorised as role-playing games. Role-playing games (RPGs) are games that involve users to become players in a digitalised world where they interact with the game, perform and complete tasks, and seek entertainment in the process of playing (Chen & Wu, 2021; Chiu & Hsieh, 2017; Daniau, 2016; Grande-de-Prado et al., 2020; Granic et al., 2014; Zalka, 2012). These video games are termed role-playing as players assume roles in the virtual world and act accordingly to the quests and tasks assigned. An example is Liu's (2018) research on Lara Croft from the popular *Tomb Raider* series, Lara becomes an explorer and as she explores the world, she seeks the hidden treasures and understands the culture of several lost civilisations. The same also applies to Beck and Rose's (2018) research where they have mentioned the sexualised games, *RapeLay* and *Custer's Revenge*. The disturbing ultimate goal of raping the female characters is the role the player assumes when playing the game. Being a popular entertainment medium, RPGs allow endless imagination as a player explores the world in the game (Daniau, 2016; Zalka, 2012) and with the increasing advancement of 3D technology, the virtual world in RPGs has become increasingly realistic which allows players to be more immersed in the game (Chiu & Hsieh, 2017).

Literature on RPGs is often associated with education (see Chen & Wu, 2021; Chiu & Hsieh, 2017; Grande-de-Prado et al., 2020; Granic et al., 2014; Zalka, 2012). Contents in RPGs, when wisely used by all parties in the field of education, offer many benefits (Chiu & Hsieh, 2017; Grande-de-Prado et al., 2020). RPGs promote a new, authentic way of learning that greatly motivates students in the process of learning (Grande-de-Prado et al., 2020; Zalka, 2012). Due to the highly interactive environment in RPGs, Chiu and Hsieh (2017) stated that RPGs help in increasing student participation and motivation to learn. They further stated that with the in-game environment of RPGs that can be designed according to a different real-world environment such as ancient civilisations and foreign countries, students may actually learn more about the historical and cultural contexts of these settings when playing the game. Nevertheless, RPGs allow students to develop higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) and critical thinking skills as agreed in much literature (Chen & Wu, 2021; Chiu & Hsieh, 2017; Grande-de-Prado et al., 2020; Granic et al., 2014; Zalka, 2012). Players constantly engage in tasks and

quests which require problem-solving; these help in boosting the mental capacity of the players and they may even develop professional skills suitable to be employed in the real world (Chen & Wu, 2021; Chiu & Hsieh, 2017; Grande-de-Prado et al., 2020; Zalka, 2012).

However, one of the many characteristics of RPGs involves “learning by doing” as Zalka (2012) placed it. The contents presented in RPGs inform cultural and social values that reflect the real world where people live (Zalka, 2012). Further, the surrounding environment in the virtual world of RPGs enables people to think about the ethics, morals, and values of the gameplay experience (Grande-de-Prado et al., 2020). Referring to the contents on how female characters are sexualised in video games, these sexualised contents inform people that this is how women live in the society regardless of the different types of environments in RPGs. Grand Theft Auto, as an example from the research by Beck and Rose (2018) and Ferguson and Colwell (2019), highlights the culture of degrading women into a group of people that provides sexual-related services for the pleasure of men like prostitution and stripping. RapeLay and Custer’s Revenge as mentioned in Beck and Rose’s (2018) review of literature is another example of informing sexual assault on women to the players. Last but not the least, the depiction and design of Lara Croft in the Tomb Raider series in Liu’s (2018) research informs the society where women should look like Lara Croft or Barbie Dolls as mentioned by Near (2013), which these two are highly unrealistic but it becomes a culture to look like that for attractive purposes. With the examples of these contents widely available, RPGs may not be seemingly educational for students and children without proper inspection of the contents.

FAMILY SETTING IN GOOGLE PLAY STORE

The Google Play Store has its service provided by the Google Limited Liability Company (Google LLC) and Google Ireland Limited (Google, 2022a). Through Google Play Store, different types of applications are made available for various purposes: Gaming, reading, and watching movies and television (Google, 2022b). To access these applications, a user simply needs to have a Google account and the applications will be available for downloading (Google, 2022b). Further, with a Google account, a user may also include the preferred payment methods if there is a need to make any purchase when using the application (Google, 2022b).

The Google Play Store has features designed for families and for those who wish to manage the children’s access to Google Play contents, a guide is made available (Google, 2022c). Through the Parent Guide as outlined in Google (2022c), parents will know how to supervise the child’s account such as setting the screen time, locking the phone’s screen for bedtime, blocking unwanted applications from children, and approving purchases and downloads of applications. Further, in the parental control setting, parents are also able to restrict potential mature content on Google Play; advertisements shown in Google Play would be consistent across the age of the children but should any inappropriate content appear in the advertisements, parents can report them. Parents are also able to refer to the guide to content ratings that is available in Google Help. While there are different types of rating standards across countries and regions (North & South America, Europe & Middle East, Germany, Australia, Brazil, South Korea, and Other Countries), we refer to the Other Countries section since Malaysia is not listed in the categories aforementioned. The following table outlines the content ratings and the corresponding descriptions as shown in Google (2022c).

TABLE 1. Content ratings and corresponding descriptions

Rating	Description
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3+	Rated for 3+ Suitable for all age groups. Some violence in a comical or fantasy context is acceptable. Bad language is not permitted.
7+	Rated for 7+ May contain some scenes or sounds that are frightening for children. Mild violence (implied or non-realistic) is permitted.
12+	Rated for 12+ Violence involving fantasy characters and/or non-graphic violence involving human-looking characters or animals is permitted. Non-graphic nudity, mild language and simulated gambling are also permitted, but sexual expletives are not.
16+	Rated for 16+ Realistic violence, sexual activity, strong language, use of tobacco and drugs, and the depiction of criminal activities are permitted.
18+	Rated for 18+ Graphic violence, including depictions lacking motive and/or directed towards defenceless character, and sexual violence are permitted. May also include graphic sexual content, discriminatory acts and/or glamourisation of illegal drug use.

FREDRICKSON AND ROBERTS' OBJECTIFICATION THEORY

Developed by Barbara L. Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts in 1997, the Objectification Theory is a framework used to explain how women are treated and valued as sexualised objects in society (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Szymanski et al., 2010). In the Objectification Theory, it seeks to describe in a detailed manner how women have been sexually objectified and the psychological consequences they have to face from the objectifying treatment. In relation to the extent how women are sexually objectified, Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) stated that women are generally incapable of controlling the men's gazes and inspection of their bodies, and when their bodies are being evaluated, they become objectified where values are assigned to them for sexual purposes. To the eyes of men, women's bodies are derogated into objects to meet their sexual pleasures.

Furthermore, according to Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), visual media serves as a medium that propagates sexual objectification of women. Accordingly, in advertisements, magazines, films, television programs, and music videos, and women are depicted with their heads removed and the focus is on their bodies. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) placed such intentional portrayal of women as "face-ism" bias and argued that such action degrades women even further. The practice of portraying only women's body parts has led to distorted formation of evaluative criteria among men, where women's bodies are evaluated for reproductive purposes; such practice of portraying women's bodies also strengthens the patriarchal culture, where women are only valued if they fulfil their roles as sexual objects and abuse.

Further in the Objectification Theory, sexual objectification has a profound effect on women of different ethnicities (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). In many media, African American women are considered animals; Asian American women as exotic and sexually submissive figures. The sexual stereotyping of these women of different ethnicities has resulted in them being disquieted when they are in public areas. Regardless of ethnicities, a common phenomenon is that, as Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) placed it, most men tend to drift off when gazing at women and indulge the imagination of sexual fantasy. Given the existence of

racism and patriarchy, the sexual objectification of women has strengthened women's disempowerment and gender stereotypes (Aksar & Firdaus, 2021).

Women face numerous psychologically negative consequences as a result of sexual objectification by men and visual media (Aksar & Firdaus, 2021). According to Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), women's social mobility becomes less secure, and they can only live comfortably in society if they have sexually attractive figures. Beauty thus becomes the main currency in determining women's survival. As a result, women become conscious of their existing physique and tend to seek any means to make themselves look more attractive. Without an attractive physique, women's confidence to live in society gradually diminishes. Sexual objectification of women further leads to women experiencing shame, especially when women fail to meet the established cultural standards about how a woman's body should look like. The cultural standards about women's bodies have led to an imposed obligation on women, and if women fail to meet these standards, they are ought to be ashamed of themselves. Consequently, to meet these standards women have to seek extreme measures such as engaging in excessive exercise, an unhealthy diet practising, and over purchasing beauty products. In extreme cases, women extend the measures into "correcting" their bodies through surgeries just to meet the "standards". Disheartening, the trend of achieving these unhealthy standards about the body is still prevalent in today's society as reported by Szymanski et al. (2011).

Finally, as women are frequently exposed to sexual objectification, they tend to experience anxiety. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) classified anxiety into two different types: Appearance anxiety and safety anxiety. In appearance anxiety, women become conscious of their appearance. They tend to check on their appearance and make adjustments when they deem their appearance as being not fashionable. Safety anxiety, on the other hand, involves women feeling a sense of physical insecurity when they may be raped. Due to their appearance, women who are considered attractive have a higher possibility of being raped, and rape victims are often blamed as they are the ones who "provoked" men further by "asking for it". The shift of blame from men, being the perpetrator of raping, to women in the feminist lens is a characteristic of rape myths since rape myths articulate the notion of women bringing themselves to be raped rather than men who actually sexually assaulted them.

By placing the Objectification Theory into RPGs and visual media, the aforementioned games in the literature reviewed (see Beck & Rose, 2018; Liu, 2018; Near, 2013) especially Custer's Revenge, Grand Theft Auto, and RapeLay are notable examples of sexually objectifying women. Further, the disturbing ultimate goal of raping the female characters in Custer's Revenge and RapeLay potentially creates safety anxiety among women as it informs the vulnerability of women to be raped by men; the unrealistic body figure of Lara Croft in the Tomb Raider series reinforces appearance anxiety among women, which may subsequently lead women to unhealthily and unrealistically pursuit such figure similar to Lara Croft as it is considered as a "desirable" trait in the society. With advertisements that promote the notion of "sex sells" as mentioned by Alam et al. (2019), exposure to such content among children would only educate them to believe that this is the notion and culture they are living in the society which is a negative consequence stated by Law et al. (2020).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To conduct the research, a qualitative research inquiry is used to achieve the research objectives. Specifically, the inquiry is divided into two main processes which first begin with using the observational method and are followed by content analysis.

OBSERVATIONAL DESCRIPTIVE STUDY

An observational descriptive study is a form of qualitative research inquiry that is extensively discussed by Edgar and Manz (2017). An observational descriptive study is used when the researcher intends to observe and describe the trends and phenomena that occur in the cyber platform (Edgar & Manz, 2017). In the digitalised platform, MacKenzie (2013) has mentioned that any observation conducted is dependent on the researcher's eyes and screen-capturing tools before analysing the data. Further, through the use of an observational descriptive study a researcher is capable of capturing the specific details through observation and interpreting these specific details subjectively without being bound to any theories, systems, and models (Edgar & Manz, 2017; MacKenzie, 2013).

Subsequently, since an observational descriptive study involves the use of observation, MacKenzie (2013) stated that the authentic findings, if not based on preconceived notions or bias of the researcher, would lead to presenting empirical data. Accordingly, empirical data refers to findings of the phenomena from the observation that are not altered or biased by any existing theories (MacKenzie, 2013). Walshe et al. (2011) also offered several advantages of using the observation method. Through this method, Walshe et al. (2011) mentioned that researchers can carefully observe how the data is presented, specifically how actions, roles, and behaviours are exhibited in the data. The findings not only contribute to presenting empirical data as mentioned by MacKenzie (2013), but they also aid in explaining the phenomena being researched.

CRITERIA FOR CONTENT ANALYSIS

To analyse the video advertisement, content analysis is used. Content analysis (CA) is one of the most common methods used in qualitative research, and it can be used on a wide range of data including texts, visuals, and media (Elo et al., 2014; Griffin & Griffin III, 2021; Schmierbach, 2009). Mainly, the use of content analysis is to provide vivid descriptions of the data gathered (Bengtsson, 2016; Griffin & Griffin III, 2021; Lai & To, 2015; Schmierbach, 2009) and the process of conducting CA is not bound to any specific science or rules in research (Bengtsson, 2016). Despite being a qualitative method, the use of CA allows researchers to quantify data through categorising and classifying data to further describe the data (Elo et al., 2014). Regardless of the data, the content analysis aims at identifying the manifest and latent information that are in the data (Bengtsson, 2016; Griffin & Griffin III, 2021; Lai & To, 2015). Manifest information refers to the actual findings obtained from the source, such as the original texts and words used; latent information refers to the underlying meaning extracted from the sources and it is based on how the information is interpreted by the researcher (Bengtsson, 2016; Elo et al., 2014; Griffin & Griffin III, 2021; Lai & To, 2015). Nevertheless, a major benefit of using CA is that the researcher's opinions are allowed to be articulated, and quantitative inquiries on the phenomenon of interest could not be achieved (Lai & To, 2015).

Lai and To (2015) and Bengtsson (2016) outlined the basic steps of conducting CA. The steps in CA involve (1) Decontextualising the data, (2) Compiling, categorising and coding the data, (3) Interpreting and analysing the data, and (4) Reporting the findings. Elo et al. (2014) described the ways to conduct CA in three phases, which are the preparation phase, organisation phase, and reporting phase respectively. The steps in these three phases are similar to the steps mentioned by Lai and To (2015) and Bengtsson (2016). Before initiating CA, proper selection of the samples must be established to strengthen the trustworthiness or validity of the research (Bengtsson, 2016; Elo et al., 2014).

To frame the samples for the research, a purposive sampling method is used. Elo et al. (2014) have mentioned that the purposive sampling method is the most common method in qualitative research inquiries. This is to ensure that only the best samples or informants are included to provide the necessary data (Elo et al., 2014; Griffin & Griffin III, 2021). As the

research aims at exploring the sexualisation of video game advertisements in Google Play, the selection of samples is thus based on the following criteria:

1. The video games must be available in Google Play Store.
2. The video games belong to the Role-Playing category in Google Play Store.
3. The Family Setting in Google Play Store is not turned on.
4. The video games contain video advertisements in Google Play Store.
5. The video game advertisements must have noticeable female characters.

For the research, the first 30 video games in Google Play Store are referred to and used. These 30 video games are as listed in the appendix. Based on the criteria established, the researcher then narrows down the video games into those that have female characters present in the video advertisements and the corresponding ratings. Once the sampling frame is achieved, observation is conducted and all initial findings are recorded in the researchers' notebook for further reference and analysis; the directed approach or also known as the deductive approach to CA is used to analyse the data. The decision to use the directed approach comes with the rationale of the researchers' understanding of the phenomenon, which concerns the sexualising of women in video games (Griffin & Griffin III, 2021). Further, the directed approach enables the researchers to determine the applicability of Fredrickson and Roberts' (1997) Objectification Theory in video game advertisements, which is a significance unique to using the directed approach in CA (Bengtsson, 2016). To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, both researchers have analysed and interpreted the video game advertisements separately before coming to a conclusion.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

A total of 30 video games from the Google Play Store were obtained on the 14th of January, 2022. These 30 video games were the first 30 video games among the many hundreds in the category of Role-Playing. To restate, the Family Setting in Google Play Store was not turned on to avoid intentional filtering of video games in the application. However, it should be noted that during the commencement of the research, the 24th video game in the Role-Playing category, 九州逍遥录 (Jiu Zhou Xiao Yao Lu), is no longer accessible and possibly removed from the category. Hence, only 29 video games are left for analysis.

FILTERING THE VIDEO GAMES

To achieve the aforementioned criteria in the sampling frame mentioned, we first identified the number of video games in the Google Play Store that have video advertisements. The frequency of video games that have video advertisements is shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2. Frequency of Google Play Store video games that have video advertisements

	Frequency		Total
	With videos	Pictures only	
Video Games	15	14	29

From Table 2 and as of 14th January 2022, the majority of the games had video advertisements. At that time, the difference between those games that had video advertisements (15) and pictures only (14) was only a subtle difference of one. Those video games that had video advertisements were highlighted in yellow in Appendix A.

TABLE 3. Ratings of video games that had advertisements

	Ratings					Total
	3+	7+	12+	16+	18+	
Games	Time Princess	Guardians of Cloudia	剑侠情缘 R	Lineage W	-	
	Icing on the Dress	Webmaster 3D	Chimeraland			
	Impossible Car Stunt Games	Tap Titans 2	永夜星神			
			Marvel Future Fight			
			Shadow Fight 3			
			Become a Celebrity			
			LifeAfter			
			Marvel Future Revolution			
Frequency	3	3	8	1	0	15

With the 30 video games on Google Play Store narrowed down to 15 games that had video advertisements. We further look into the ratings of each game. Table 3 displays the categorising of games according to their ratings. It can be seen that the rating for 12+ has the highest number of games, totalling up to eight video games; the rating that has the least number is 16+ which only Lineage W falls under this category. For ratings 3+ and 7+, there are three games respectively but among the remaining 15 video games, none of the video games has a rating of 18+. Evidently, most video games on Google Play Store would require users to be at least 12 age to access and play them.

TABLE 4. Ratings of video games that had advertisements

	Frequency		Total
	Present	Not present	
Female characters			
Games	剑侠情缘 R	Marvel Future Fight	
	Chimeraland	Shadow Fight 3	
	永夜星神	Webmaster 3D	
	Guardians of Cloudia	Lineage W	
	Time Princess	Impossible Car Stunt Games	
	Icing on the Dress	Tap Titans 2	
	Become a Celebrity		
	LifeAfter		
	Marvel Future Revolution		
	9	6	15

Table 4 displays the involvement of female characters in the video game advertisements on the Google Play Store. Among the 15 video game advertisements identified, nine video game advertisements had female characters present while the remaining six video games did not show any female characters. From the table, the findings show that most video games have female characters present.

THEMES FROM THE CONTENT ANALYSIS

From Table 4, after the process of filtering the 30 video games on the Google Play Store, there are only nine games left that have female characters in the corresponding video advertisements made available in the application. CA is performed to analyse these nine video advertisements

to explore if sexualisation has occurred. To perform CA, we recorded the nine video advertisements using the in-built screen recorder on the researchers' smartphones. These videos are then transferred to the researchers' laptops for analysis where the researchers are able to capture the details in the videos through settings such as screenshotting and playback speed control. During the analysis, we deconstruct the video advertisements by observing the female characters' appearances, body shapes, attires, environments, actions, and behaviours. Notes are taken and arranged until the necessary findings, or also themes, are generated. To summarize, from the CA conducted, we have found two themes that indicate sexualisation occurs in these video advertisements and each theme is further discussed.

UNREALISTIC BODY SHAPES

The very first theme is the unrealistic portrayal of body shapes among the female characters in the video advertisements. Notably, in *Jian Xia Qing Yuan R* (剑侠情缘 R), *Deity of Evernight* (永夜星神), *Icing on the Dress*, *Become a Celebrity*, *LifeAfter*, and *Marvel Future Revolution*. In these mentioned video games, the female characters are all shown to have big breasts, narrow waists, and slender thighs. An example of two female characters in the video advertisement of *Jian Xia Qing Yuan R* who demonstrate such body shapes is shown in Figure 1. Both female characters are shown to have big breasts and narrow waists, which accordingly would fit into the narrative that the characters should be sexually attractive for players to play the video game.



FIGURE 1. Unrealistic body shape of female characters

In another video game advertisement on *Icing on the Dress*, while the video game advertises the interesting dresses a player can design and stylise, the female characters in the advertisement have unrealistic body shapes, however. This is especially evident in Figure 2 where almost all of the female characters have overly-sized breasts. In addition to the overly-sized breasts, these female characters in different dresses have exaggerated narrow waists that are not in proportion to the sizes of the breasts. Also in Figure 3, a screenshot of a scene in the video advertisement for *Become a Celebrity*, the same unrealistic body shape is shown in the leading female character of the advertisement. The female characters who have oversized breasts accompanied by their body shapes in the advertisement from *Icing on the Dress* are similar to Near's (2013) description of female characters in video games, where he referred to them as Barbie Dolls for attractive purposes.



FIGURE 2. Overly-sized breasts and exaggerated narrow waists

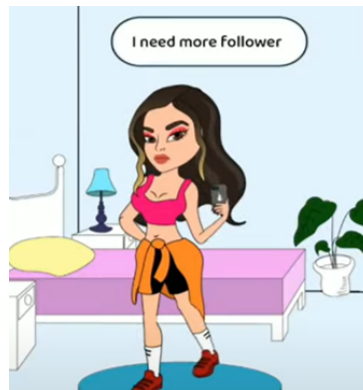


FIGURE 3. Unrealistic body shape in Become a Celebrity

Other than having big breasts and narrow waists, the female characters in LifeAfter have shown to have huge hips but a smaller body torso with a narrow waist. Further, within the video advertisement of LifeAfter and lying between the fourth and sixth second into the advertisement, there are three different female characters in different attires are running in a direction in similar behaviour as shown in Figure 4. When observing the video advertisement closely, all three female characters have huge hips but smaller upper body shapes. The faces of all three female characters are not shown and only the back view in these three scenes is available. Such scenes of not showing the faces of the female characters are similar to the portrayal of Lara Croft in the Tomb Raider series by Liu (2017), where she too did not have her face shown in the promotional poster for the eighth series.



FIGURE 4. Female character with big hips

REVEALING ATTIRES

The second theme obtained from the analysis of all these video game advertisements is attires that are revealing. Among the nine video game advertisements observed, we have noticed that some female characters are wearing exposing attires as they move around in the advertisements. One of the obvious examples is from *Marvel Future Revolution*, where as a female character engages in battle, her attire or battle armour is comprised only of a breastplate but has a design no different from a brassiere. It is also arguable that the armour that she is wearing is only a brassiere but forged through metal. Further, in the video advertisement and as seen in Figure 4, she is shown to only put up a handguard, leg guard, gladiator-style undergarment, a wing-like helmet, and some chokers. In a game where it involves fighting using weapons and superpowers as seen in the video advertisement, the design for this female character is questionable as it only makes her vulnerable to any direct attack from the opponent.

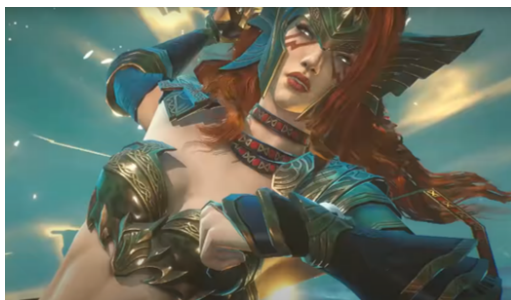


FIGURE 5. A semi-nude female character in battle

Another female character that is shown to be wearing revealing body armour can be found in the video advertisement from *Deity of Evernight* (永夜星神). As shown in Figure 5, other than the oversized breasts, her body parts can be clearly seen such as the breasts' cleavage, thighs, and arms. Within the figure, she is shown to be holding a set of tonfas with blades attached. This is arguably dangerous and may lead to accidental self-harm as she is not fully protected from her armour further with the exposed body parts.

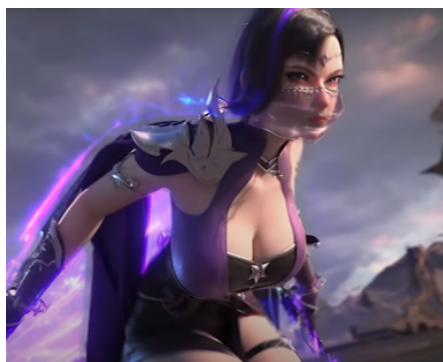


FIGURE 6. A female character's revealing armour

Similarly in Figure 4 as shown in the previous theme, the female character in the video advertisement of *LifeAfter* wears a crop top which greatly reveals the abdomen and waist. The attire of this female character in *LifeAfter* appears ironic, as the *LifeAfter* description states that humans will become zombies if bitten by one. Given the perilous environment, the character must survive while attempting to avoid physical contact. However, the exposed body

parts may increase the likelihood of being bitten directly by the in-game zombies, defeating the purpose of armouring.

Other than the two themes, another detail worth noting is that there is a suggestive act shown in one of the video advertisements. In the video advertisement from *Become a Celebrity*, the female character is shown lying down on the bed with her face looking at the smartphone. The caption of the scene reads “Bunny Challenge” and from the surface, she is shown having her feet up and are placed at a position where when viewed from a certain angle, she has a pair of bunny ears. Further, in the figure shown the female character’s posture can be viewed as being sexy due to the way she stares in the scene. However, it can be criticised that if a player wishes to do the Bunny Challenge, there are alternatives to act like a bunny such as the use of hands, masks, and headbands instead of suggesting an imagination of cute, submissive, and sexy.

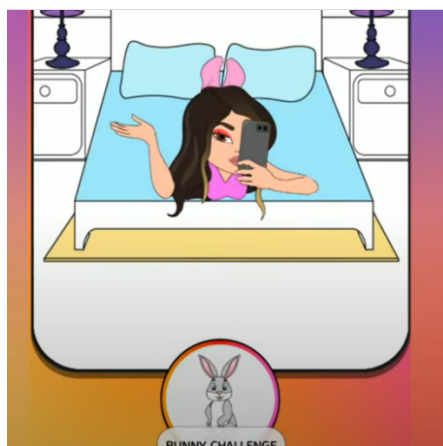


FIGURE 7. Suggestive action from a female character

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

From the pieces of evidence shown, it can be seen that the female characters in video game advertisements are actually sexualised. In the first theme, most of the female characters in the video game advertisements have unrealistic body shapes. This is especially evident in *Jian Xia Qing Yuan R*, *LifeAfter*, *Become a Celebrity*, and *Icing on the Dress*. They are presented as characters with big breasts, narrow waists, big hips, and slender figures. The unrealistic presentation of female body shapes is similar to the RPGs in Lara Croft’s *Tomb Raider* series (Liu, 2018; Near, 2013) and *Grand Theft Auto* (Beck & Rose, 2018; Ferguson & Colwell, 2019).

These body shapes and attires in the video advertisements are arguably capable of influencing children, where as they get to access the video games, they would think that this is how a female should look like: (1) Big breasts, (2) narrow waists, (3) big hips, (4) slender figures, and (5) wear revealing attire. This instils an appearance-valued culture among children and especially when girls grow up, they may experience appearance anxiety. As an example, in the first theme on unrealistic body shapes, the female characters in *Icing on the Dress* have exaggerated body shapes where they are presented as having oversized breasts and very narrow waists. Given the content rating for *Icing on the Dress* is 3+, this means that children as young as three years of age will have a chance to be exposed to the ideology of having this body shape. Further, to achieve the desired body shape, girls and women will become conscious and anxious on whether their bodies meet the criteria, an act that Fredrickson and Roberts (1997)

in the Objectification Theory claimed to be unhealthy. This is also evident in Figure 3 shown earlier where the female character states clearly “I need more follower(s).” In that particular scene of the video advertisement from *Become a Celebrity*, she is trying to stay fit and maintain that shape to get more followers. If girls begin to pursue such body figures as portrayed in the video game advertisements, they may take excessive and extreme measures to achieve it, which results in them putting their lives and health at risk (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Szymanski et al., 2011).

When referred to the content ratings of the respective video games on Google Play, Jian Xia Qing Yuan R, *Deity of Evernight*, *LifeAfter*, and *Marvel Future Revolution* have content ratings of 12+. This content rating, although permits violence among fantasy characters, which these video game advertisements involve battling each other or killing zombies, also allows non-graphic nudity to be present in the game. Semantically, while this rating simply means no nudity in games for children aged 12 and up, semi-nudity appears to be permitted because the figures presented earlier in the theme on revealing attires are evidence of sexualisation. Children who interact with these games may be exposed to the culture that females should dress seductively. As children continue to grow, they become conscious of their body shapes, which leads to appearance anxiety, and they may also develop safety anxiety, which is another type of anxiety according to Fredrickson and Roberts’ (1997) Objectification Theory. The revealing attires may result raping to occur and even lead to the false belief about she “provoked” or “asked for it” (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

In *Icing on the Dress* and *Become a Celebrity* which have content ratings of 3+ and 12+ respectively, it is arguable that the video advertisements subtly hinted that sex does indeed sell. In both video advertisements, other than the female characters being presented as having big breasts and narrow waists, both video games share the same goal where the player has to present the female characters that attract other audiences. For example, in *Icing on the Dress*, the player has to design the female characters with dresses that make them look beautiful; in *Become a Celebrity*, the player has to make herself a successful social influencer by participating in social trends to increase followers. One such example is aforementioned where in the *Bunny Challenge* on *Become a Celebrity*, the female character is seen posing sexily to attract more followers to be a successful influencer. As discussed in the literature, these two goals directly conform to the sexual objectification of women, where their appearance must be kept in check and improved at all times (Burnay et al., 2018; Karsay et al., 2018; Liu, 2018; Skowronski et al., 2011). The designs of these female characters in video game advertisements have reassured the notion of “sex sells”, as Alam et al. (2019) term it, and it is a concerning matter as *Icing on the Dress* is available for children who are as young as three years old. Repetitively, this goal of constantly presenting oneself attractively to seek attraction from the audience also leads to educating children that they should do so too, subsequently leading them to develop appearance anxiety as elaborated earlier in Fredrickson and Roberts’ (1997) Objectification theory.

The concept of “sex sells” proposed by Alam et al. (2019) is reinforced in the *LifeAfter* video advertisement. As previously stated, the three female figures running in the same direction did not have their faces shown at all. The *LifeAfter* video advertisement arguably promotes the video game by showing the hips of the female characters, similar to how Lara Croft’s *Tomb Raider* series is being promoted in the advertising poster where her face is not shown at all, as stated by Liu (2018). Additionally, the female characters in Jian Xia Qing Yuan R, *Deity of Evernight*, *LifeAfter*, and *Marvel Future Revolution* are portrayed with unrealistic body shapes with revealing attires. By sexualising the portrayal of these female characters in the video advertisements, it can be argued that the developers make use of the fact that males are more attracted to such human-looking, almost real female characters. These video advertisements then have certainly reflected Tang et al.’s (2019) statement that video game

industries mainly target the male audience, hence using sexual appeal is a method to attract consumers. Evidently, advertising video games on Google Play is driven by the notion of “sex sells” to attract players in downloading them.

CONCLUSION

Sexualisation of female characters does not only occur in video games but is also found in video game advertisements. Through the use of several qualitative research methods, prominently observations and content analysis, we have revealed that female characters in video game advertisements are indeed sexualised. Through the process of careful filtering of the first 30 games in the Google Play Store in January, seven video game advertisements are found to be sexualising female characters. It can be inferred that, when the Family Setting in Google Play Store is not turned on, there is a 23% chance in every 30 video games a child will encounter video advertisements that sexualise female characters. Through the use of Fredrickson and Roberts’ (1997) Objectification Theory, we argue that the exposure to female sexualisation will only educate children to be sexualised, especially girls; not only are they at risk of developing appearance anxiety and safety anxiety, but they too may also learn that sex is the way of living in the society based on the impression experienced through these video advertisements, which further leads them to take excessive measures to meet these unhealthy practices thus putting their lives in danger.

Further, these sexualised contents may also mislead young adults, both male and female, to perceive that this is the way women should look like in the society. As the young adults move on to higher education, other than pursuing their studies, attaining the perceived figure as shown in many media will lead to poor mental and physical health, which will be detrimental to both the individuals and studies when prolonged. In fact, as a member of today’s technologically savvy generation, a university student may be able to turn off the setting at any time, exposing them to these sexualised contents. As a result, sexual content will be normalised, making gender equality a challenge for the community.

As such, to restate, turning on the Family Setting enables parents to control the contents children see and report inappropriate content (Google, 2022c). This method, while still be functioning as long as parents have control over the device, will aid in ensuring children are restricted from content that is potentially harmful at a young age, subsequently protecting children from practicing unsafe and misleading sexual practices as they gradually grow up.

We, however, do not deny that video games especially RPGs offer many potential benefits as discussed in the literature. Turning on the Family Setting does not guarantee the total removal of unwanted contents from being accessed by children as the system will display advertisements that may be suitable as the child grows (Google, 2022c). Further, RPGs are actually educational materials that help develop HOTS and critical thinking skills (Chen & Wu, 2021; Chiu & Hsieh, 2017; Grande-de-Prado et al., 2020; Zalka, 2012) when used appropriately. Parents should not shun this topic but rather, take the initiative to educate the children about sex and reproductive health as well as the pitfall of sexualising women in the community.

There are several limitations to this research that must be addressed. Firstly, as the ranking of video games in Google Play changes from time to time, there is no definitive ranking of the video games. Since the researchers have taken the ranking at a specific time in January, the same ranking may have been changed immediately after that day. Future research should account for the changes that may occur in the ranking when deciding on the sampling frame. Further, during the filtering process, the number of video games that are actually used for analyses has greatly shortened. A larger number of video games from the Google Play Store can be sampled to further determine the extent of female characters are sexualised in the video

game advertisements. Finally, as stated earlier Google Play has a total of 17 categories of video games available. As the researchers only looked into one category, there may be some video advertisements that also sexualise female characters. Future research may consider expanding the scope to other categories as well for better analyses.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A. Top 30 games from Google Play Store

No.	Name of the Game
1.	剑侠情缘 R (Jian Xia Qing Yuan R)
2.	Chimeraland
3.	永夜星神 (Deity of Evernight)
4.	Guardians of Cloudia
5.	Time Princess
6.	Hair Dye
7.	Marvel Future Fight
8.	Foot Clinic – ASMR Feet Care
9.	Cat Runner: Decorate Home
10.	Coach Bus Driving Simulator
11.	Shadow Fight 3 – RPG Fighting
12.	Miami Rope Hero Spider Games
13.	Children's Doctor: Dentist
14.	Web Master 3D
15.	蛋国英雄 (Dan Guo Ying Xiong)
16.	Icing on the Dress
17.	Become a Celebrity
18.	斗罗大陆: 武魂觉醒 (Dou Luo Da Lu: Wu Hun Jue Xing)
19.	Lineage W
20.	Mighty Party
21.	Bus Simulator – Bus Games 3D
22.	City Driving School Car Games
23.	LifeAfter
24.	九州逍遥录 (Jiu Zhou Xiao Yao Lu) *N.A.
25.	Mirage: Perfect Skyline
26.	Tap Titans 2: Clicker RPG Game
27.	恋恋清廷: 邂逅 (Lian Lian Qing Ting: Xie Hou)
28.	Impossible Car Stunt Games
29.	Marvel Future Revolution
30.	Love Diana Fashion Fabulous

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