ABSTRACT

Personal Narratives of Gamers: Sense of Community, Social Identity, and Social Support
of Gaming Communities

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Online communities play a significant part in an individual's social wellbeing, so
it is important to understand how these communities manifest positive change. The
present study utilized qualitative semi-structured interviews with 10 World of Warcraft
(WoW) players to examine their experiences in their respective communities. The goal of
this study is to contribute knowledge and provide a greater understanding as to how
gamers develop social capital in online communities. Analysis of this study revealed that
participants did report feeling a sense of community, identity, and support within their
WoW communities. Findings indicated that certain gaming environments influenced
these relationships. Continued exploration of the player experience could help identify
effective strategies to promote positive changes to a gamer's social capital.

*Key words: online games, sense of community, social identity, social support, personal
narratives, qualitative*

Personal Narratives of Gamers: Sense of Community, Social Identity, and Social Support of
Gaming Communities

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DEDICATION

To my family, friends, and community, for their support, encouragement, and love.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

On 7 April 2020, the national government declared a state of emergency as the coronavirus, COVID-19, began to spread across the world. The national government declared the disease as a pandemic and restrictions were placed to attempt to mitigate the spread (Higuchi, 2020). Universities closed and people were strongly recommended to stay at home and keep outdoor travel to a minimum. As the world came to a sudden stop and physical interactions decreased, the consumptions of digital entertainment, specifically video games, began to increase dramatically (Higuchi et al., 2020). The purpose of this study is to provide a greater understanding to the field of online communication and gaming communities. Specifically, this study aims to analyze the lived experiences of individuals who identify with belonging to a gaming community and provide valuable information about how these experiences develop a sense of community, social identity, and social support.

The term 'video game' is a catch-all term for a variety of electronic interactions that generates visual feedback to a player (Boellstorff, 2008). Video games can be classified into a wide range of genres based on their type of gameplay or purpose. Genres are similar to the large variety of sports played at the Olympics. For example, distance swimming represents a sport genre that demonstrates endurance, whereas gymnastics represents razor sharp precision and technique. In the same way, gamers identify with different genres based on their interests as well as their own strengths within that video

game. One of the most popular genres of games, massively multiplayer online role-playing games, or MMORPGs, are designed specifically for community creation, development, and cooperation. Unlike the typical structured games with levels and progression, MMORPGs emphasize the player's ability to be free to do what they want as long as it fits within the context of the game (Boellstorff, 2008). Some players prefer the casual approach and seek community events like in-game holiday events or virtual fashion shows. For example, every October, World of Warcraft hosts an in-game Halloween event in which players can defeat a boss that is only available for a few weeks. The boss drops special cosmetic items like broomstick mounts and pumpkin heads. Players can work together with friends to obtain these rewards and use them throughout the rest of the event. In contrast, others prefer the more rigorous and competitive scene where they join teams to compete in seasonal tournaments and determine the top players in the region. It's important to make the distinctions between genres of games because the personal narratives of different individuals are connected to their feelings of belonging and identity within an online community (O'Connor, Longman, White, and Obst, 2015). Whether the individual joined an existing community or created the community themselves, the entry point is influenced by how they perceive their experience.

For this study, we will be focusing on MMORPGs, specifically World of Warcraft (WoW). World of Warcraft is played in an online fantasy-style environment with medieval structures, swords, and armor. Players are represented by the characters they create, selecting the race (such as humans or orcs), class (warrior or warlock), gender, and faction (alliance or horde). Each class offers a variety of different strengths

of weaknesses, and it requires cooperation between nearly all classes to form an effective team. MMORPGs are considered open-world games, meaning the player can choose what they want to do within the game. The most common playstyle is to complete quests and earn rewards. Players may choose to complete activities on their own, or they may engage with others through online communication (in-game or on a communication platform) to form groups and participate in team-based content. They may choose to join temporary groups or join more permanent social communities called guilds (O'Connor, Longman, White, and Obst, 2015). Guilds are formal structures within the game that allow members, or guildmates, to participate in organized content. The bonding within the unique virtual environment of MMORPGs leads to social relationships that are similar in nature to other online and offline relationships. An examination of these social relationships through frameworks is required to determine the possible benefits of online gaming communities.

Studying this specific genre is significant because community development is one of the core elements of MMORPGs. The core element of MMORPGs can manifest in two ways. First, the primary style of gameplay within MMORPGs caters heavily toward collaboration and active communication, which can allow individuals to develop close relationships with their peers inside and outside of the game. For example, there are several avenues of endgame content a player can pursue in WoW. One of the main paths involves participating in raids, a high difficulty instance where players work together to defeat a gauntlet of bosses. The standard player size for a raid consists of 10 to 30 people. Defeating bosses requires a significant amount of knowledge, skill, and especially communication. MMORPGs are one of few gaming genres that is capable of facilitating

large-scale communication, making it an interesting lens for discussing the experiences gamers may face during these activities. Secondly, outside of the competitive endgame, the second element of MMORPGs is primarily community-centered and is another reason as to why this genre is worth studying. This form of gameplay is primarily motivated by the idea that gamers are doing things with their community, regardless of the actual content being done. This concept is akin to people who participate in clubs. You may be able to read books on your own and enjoy its contents, but the act of discussing the book with others can be considered as an activity in itself. Studying MMORPGs presents us with the opportunity to peek inside a world that takes relationships developed in-game and brings it to communities outside the game.

The proposed study seeks to determine the applicability of three concepts drawn from organizational communication literature: (a) sense of community, (b) social identity, and (c) social support. This prospectus begins by examining the literature surrounding online communities, MMORPGs, gamers, and the three concepts mentioned previously. Then, the significance of personal narratives and how they contribute to these concepts will be discussed. Chapter three describes the methodological approach of the study. Chapter four analyzes the results and presents three core themes along with sub-themes that emphasizes important aspects of the core theme. The final chapter addresses the possible scholarly implications, the practical implications, limitations, and potential studies for future research.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to review the current literature on online communities and its impact on MMORPG gamers. Doing so helps us understand why these concepts should be studied through a communication lens. It is important to know the current research about online and gaming communities as it relates to communication and to this study. This literature review starts with a description about the development of relationships in online communities. Then, we will explain research around MMORPGs and the psychology and social capital around the player. After, there will be a discussion about how research explains the bridge between online and offline relationships. Finally, this review will analyze each of the three core constructs that will be used as a framework for the study, sense of community, social identity, and social support.

Online Communities

Since COVID-19, there has been a massive increase in the number of online communities in businesses and in social groups (Higuchi, 2020). With this increase in amount, there has been a growing need to understand how online community relationships develop and how they are strengthened. Online communities involve different relationships, whether they are employee-employer relationships or friend to friend relationships (Heinonen, 2011). Current organizational literature of online communities focuses primarily on the consumer relationship with the company. More recently, relationship dynamics has been the focus of literature on online communities.

Conceptualizing the development process of these relationships will help us better understand how relationships manifest in gaming communities.

Previous research on communities can be categorized into two different groups: studies on the consumer to business relationship, which is centered around organizational research, and studies on individual involvement in the context of life, which is centered more towards interpersonal research. Research in the former group relates to brand communities or consumption communities (Ouwersloot & Oderkerken-Shroder, 2008). Research in the latter group is centered around the interests of members in the given community. These studies explore subcultures, communities of interests, relationships, or gaming communities (Armstrong & Hagel, 1995). The focus on this section of the literature review will be around the latter categorization of online community research. Studies exploring communities of interest are based on consumers' involvement in their lives, not their economic value. The material of interest is diverse, covering a range of interests like science fiction fandom (Obst et asl., 2002) or online gaming (Hsu & Lu, 2007). Depending on the member's level of activity and involvement in the online community, different member types may occur (Heinonen, 2011). For a relationship to begin and develop, interpersonal research shows that trust needs to be formed (Luo & Zhang, 2016). Initial trust is relevant to the context of online relationships because members may not have first-hand knowledge about other members upon meeting, which makes it difficult to decide whether that person can be trusted. Therefore, initial trust is a referred to as the fundamental challenge of build relationships online (Luo & Zhang, 2016).

Developing Relationships in Online Communities

The effects of traditional factors on relationship building is reduced in online communities due to the virtuality, anonymity, and the openness of the Internet. Therefore, online relationships need to overcome a multitude of perceived risks such as social and psychological risk (Harridge-March, 2006). There are several approaches to this development, and our focus will be on the interpersonal relationship side. First, a number of studies have confirmed the role of social support and sense of community as a positive predictor for life satisfaction (Kutek, Turnbull, & Fairweather-Schmidt, 2011; Manago, Taylor, & Greenfield, 2012). Having a healthy community that makes them feel supported and at home develops trust in online relationships. In terms of social identity, it allows members to feel better about themselves and makes them want to disclose more information within their community. For example, positive feedback received from online friends was found to be the source of enhanced self-esteem (Valkenburg et al., 2006). In online communities, esteem support can be expressed by complimenting a friend's new profile avatar or introducing a friend to groups that share the same interests as them. The next section of this literature review will be about MMORPGs as a genre and why it's important to understand them in the context of this study.

Research on MMORPGs

As previously mentioned, community development is one of the core gameplay elements in MMORPGs, something that is unique to the genre. They are not limited by physical game constraints and are capable of hosting as many players as a server can accommodate at any time. According to Badrinarayanan et al. (2014), servers are "standardized in that a similar game experience is offered on all servers, and are closed

systems, such that a large number of players are consolidated together to enable the development of a sense of community within the server." Servers are like hometowns and are often used for residential purposes within the game environment. For example, guilds in MMORPGs may only consist of players in the same server.

Compared to other forms of games like singleplayer or multiplayer games, MMORPGs are designed to be non-solitary, and content is made to encourage group play. Review of research on MMORPGs is organized into two categories: player psychology and social capital.

Player Psychology in MMORPGs

Studies have examined the demographic characteristics of MMORPGs, showing that 70% of the player base is male and the average player plays for at least 20 hours a week. In terms of age, the average player age is between 25 and 30 (Yee, 2006). The average education level is higher compared with the general population (Williams, Yee, & Caplan, 2008) with almost 50% of players employed full-time, 12% employed part-time, and 22% of players are students. Researchers have attempted to identify the different motivational factors for MMORPG players. They found that players develop into different stages overtime. The first stage involved players participating in player-versus-player combat, where they fought each other for reputation in the game (Bartle, 2003). Then, they would start to interact with the game's environment and start to complete tasks like quests. Once the players grew familiar with the game's system, they would become "achievers" and focus on empowering their in-game character in order to advance further into the game. Bartle (2003) discovered that the achiever stage is one of the two main stages most players tend to stick with. Finally, the last stage is where the

players become socializers and spend the majority of their time interacting with other gamers inside and outside of the game. It may be argued that everyone engages with this stage while interacting with other stages. Yee (2007) proposed a new form of motivational factors for MMORPG players and argued Bartle's stages were connected. They proposed a simpler model that highlighted achievement, social interaction, and immersion as key motivations for players. The "achievement" motivation was similar to Bartle's work in that the player wanted to progress through the game and compete with other players (Yee, 2007). In the context of World of Warcraft (WoW), there are online leaderboards that indicate how far a player has progressed in a certain category of content. Often, these activities are completed with multiple players working together. This concept works with conjunction to Yee's second key motivation, social. Not only does the "social" motivation include making friends and talking with them, but it also includes collaborating with others to achieve group outcomes. Finally, the "immersion" motivation involves players wanting to explore the fantasy and role-playing aspect of the game (Yee, 2007). For example, WoW has specific servers designed for players that want to assume a role within the game. This means they do not want to be addressed by their personal game name, but by the name of the character they decided to roleplay as. Yee argues that some players do this to escape from reality or to distract themselves from real-world issues.

Continuing the development of research regarding player motivation, Yee (2009) created a player life cycle that illustrated the typical development of an MMORPG player. The five different stages were starting, ramping up, mastery, burnout, and casual. It starts with the player playing the game for socialization and for immersion. At some

point, they gradually advance to a point where they have mastered the game and continue to pursue higher achievement. Burnout occurs afterwards, and player no longer find a challenge or desire to climb higher in the game (Yee, 2009). Finally, as with previous models examined in this section, the player goes to a casual state where they spend most of their time socializing with friends. Understanding the player psychology in MMORPGs helps us connect this cycle of motivations to the development of community, identity, and support. One common characteristic between the three models presented is that the player always end their gaming cycle with socialization. MMORPG players enjoy playing with people they know, including friends, romantic partners, spouses, and other family members (Yee, 2009). In essence, part of the game involving hanging out with people in a tightknit community within the game, and the actual content in the game becomes extra. It is within MMORPGs that we can investigate the development of social capital within gamers.

<div align="center">Social Capital in MMORPGs</div>

The large number of social interactions occurring in MMORPGs leads to the research interest of the development of social capital gained in MMORPGs (Zhang & Kaufman, 2015). A few studies have explored the relationship between online gaming and social capital. Within those studies, it is widely agreed that MMORPGs lead to bridging social capital so that individuals can interact with relationships both online and offline (Zhang & Kaufman, 2015). For example, Zhong (2011) investigated the impact of MMORPGs on Chinese gamers' social capital in both the virtual and the real world. They also investigated the gamer's ability for social capital at both the individual and collectivist level. MMORPG gameplay is mostly collective and is defined by things like

guild activities and group content. Civic engagement in the study was measured by the participant's online and offline organization memberships. The study found that "frequent in-game social interactions and enjoyable social experiences in MMORPGs positively influence gamers' online bridging and bonding social capital" (Zhong, 2011). In another study, Williams (2006) conducted an experiment to test the social aspect of Asheron's Call II (an MMORPG). Social capital was measured by the bridging between online and offline contexts. William's study measured interactions when participants played alone and from group content, whereas Zhong's study was measured from guild interactions. William's study resulted in negative social capital being developed in participants. The measures performed between the two studies show that social interaction is necessary for positive changes in social capital within gamers.

Social capital covers a variety of different concepts, including sense of community, social identity, and social support, the primary focus of our study. This section explained the psychology and social capital of the MMORPG player. The next section discusses the relationship between the players, their gaming communities, and how it relates to online and offline relationships. This section fulfills two purposes, a) to paint a picture that MMORPGs are social worlds in which we interact with others, and b) to review the current literature regarding how the social world of gaming connects with the online and the offline.

Online and Offline Relationships

There is research that examines the attitudes and behaviors learned online and how they can be transferred into offline relationships. Previous research relied on informational media use to show that individuals can learn social behaviors online and

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then apply them into the real world. Within these studies, communication with others and expression are key in making the transition from online to offline behavior. Dr. Dmitri Williams (2010) at the University of Southern California has referred to a similar effect in which behaviors learned in virtual worlds play out in real life, as the mapping principle.

The cultural reception surrounding video games have been centered around the potentially negative effects on adolescents such as interpersonal violence and aggression (Sherry, 2001). Recently, however, with the increase in games that are focused around playing with others, scholars have been asking questions surrounding the impact of these socially networked aspects of gameplay (Dmitri, 2006). Games played over the internet have begun to connect people from around the world as they engage the gaming experience. Online gaming has become a place to research the development of social capital as it relates to face-to-face interactions. Some scholars believe that there would be a sharp decline in face-to-face interactions that will lead to a loss of social capital (Nie, 2001). In the study performed by Williams (2006), participants experienced a decline in some forms of social capital but increases in others. One caveat on these studies measuring social capital is that they cannot generalize all online video games. In order to stay within the constraints of the study, this review of literature will cover MMORPGs as the primary type of gaming because of the genre's emphasis on social interaction. The effect of the Internet on social interaction and relationships is complex issue, yet the process in which gamers interact with each other is something that New Media scholars have been interested in (Aslinger & Huntermann, 2013). The Internet made digital gaming possible, where gamers not only play online, but also play games to seek

information and connect with other gamers. In the previous section, we learned about the psychology and social capital of gamers. Here, we will discuss MMORPGs as a genre and how social interaction plays an essential role in bridging the divide between online and offline relationships.

Social interaction is a significant part of MMORPG gaming as the gameplay demands collaboration and competition to achieve goals. It also creates a space where gamers may participate in sociability, or the "idle talk gamers can engage in and around gaming, interaction for the pleasure of it, void of meaning and purpose" (Eklund, 2015). This means that MMORPG players may interact with each other to fulfill their goals or to relax and enjoy themselves. Playing an MMORPG allows gamers to immerse in an online world together, allowing them to interact and connect with each other. In order to properly work together and connect, they need to create and maintain relationships to abide by the rules created in the world they find themselves in (Eklund, 2015). Sternos, Paavillaninen, and Mayra (2011) emphasize the importance of social talk for understanding gaming.

In the debate on digital technology, the most prominent issue has been bout the division between online and offline relationships. The debate is centered around the argument that offline is the same as "real life" and that online is "virtual," therefore it is less real (Eklund, 2015). In studies on digital gaming, the dominant tradition has been to separate the virtual form the physical, viewing games as having no connection to the offline world. This separate allowed for certain terms to be coined such as cyberspace or virtual reality (Crawford, 2012). In these descriptions, rules in the outside world don't apply to games, ignoring certain limitations like nationality, class, or gender. Williams

(2006) notes that there is a tendency to overemphasize the separation of the virtual form the material. He continues to question the division on the issue of sociality and whether technology limits or enhances a user's social capital.

What if online life is not a separated space from the material life, but is in fact an extension of our social networks where we can develop our ability to interact socially? As Morley (2003) suggests, communicative action must be contextualized, meaning there are social practices among social practices. Online gaming is one of them. One of the purposes of this study is to understand the effects of these online communities and how it affects people. We need to connect online and offline and study the effects and influences in both areas, as they are linked to everyday life (Williams, 2006).

MMORPGs as social worlds

Game rules are important for the experience of the game, and they work in combination to the rules and norms of everyday life. The rules determine the structure of the game, and these rules are constantly changed in games where updates and patches adjust the ones that don't work. During this whole process, gamers appropriate and create new rules that enhances the overall game experience (Eklund, 2015). Regulative rules regulate activities in the game that determines what is or isn't allowed (Searle, 1969). They are the norms and rules of conduct that gamers engage in to uphold a proper gaming world. Most recently, Blizzard, the company that owns World of Warcraft (WoW), made the decision to ban groups that allow for players to pay for advancements in the game. For example, one player can pay another person a certain amount of gold, or in more extreme situations real currency, so that they could participate in events they might be too weak or too unskilled to participate in. As a result, they are rewarded with in-game

rewards at the cost of their own resources. Blizzard has banned this from being possible in WoW, and players who abide by the rules of their social world follow them. Instead of seeing MMORPGs as virtual worlds, we can seem them as social worlds.

The term 'social world' was coined from sociologist Anselm Strauss in 1978 and his research has been further enhanced over the years. Lehdonvirta (2010) studies the concept of social worlds as it relates to MMORPGs. Strauss refers to social worlds as universes of discourse, arenas featuring some kind of organization and as such, members share some activity with one another (Eklund, 2015, Straus, 1978). In MMORPGs, the primary activity would be gaming. However, at the same time, something unique to MMORPGs is that gaming is not the only activity that individuals engage in. Socializing and even flirting are a few other activities engaged in while connecting to the social world of an MMORPG. Lehdonvirta (2010) argues that seeing games as social worlds allows us to see into people's lives outside of the game. MMORPG gamers may see their role in the game and compare it to their work world. The particular experiences that make this argument stronger are reviewed in the thematic analysis section of the study. The social worlds an individual is engaged in overlaps and consists of groups of the same people, behaviors, etc. Coworkers in organizations interact in forms of collaboration in the workplace, and they may take that same interaction in an MMORPG. For gamers, these interactions interact with their other worlds. Social worlds overlap, exist within each other, and as a result, affect one another (Eklund, 2015). Using a social world perspective allows us to bridge the gap between virtual and real and gives us the chance to analyze online and offline relationships. The relationships themselves interact strongly with the three constructs of sense of community, social identity, and social support. The

next few sections of the review discusses the literature surrounding these three constructs and how it relates to the study.

Sense of Community in Online Communities

Sense of community (SOC) can be defined as the "feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure" (Sarason, 1977). Communities can be interest based or geographically based. Interest based communities form around the idea that you have a shared passion for something like video games or horror movies. Geographically based communities exist within one's physical location like universities or places of work. Blanchard (2007) states that communities can also exist online and manifest mainly on interest. Studies on the online SOC have been positively associated with "improved wellbeing" and "greater levels of social support" (Obst and Stafurik, 2010). Therefore, previous studies indicate that online communities are similar to offline communities in that they both provide positive outcomes and can manifest from a variety of contexts, including gaming.

Previous studies of SOC in online communities have been cited in educational contexts. There are many communities that are centered towards education, such as communities of learners (Jonassen, 1995), knowledge-building communities (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1994), and professional learning communities (Stoll et al., 2006). These communities of education share the same characteristic of being bonded together by a group of students in volved in cooperative learning through meaningful interaction with one another (Misanchuk & Anderson, 2001). Especially in the past two years, online community takes on even more relevance because students did not have the opportunity to meet and learn in the same place. The lack of in-person interaction has the

potential to lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation (McInnerney & Roberts, 2004). Educators needed to find a way to bring students together as a community while maintaining an online environment that provided positive psychological benefits to students. Brown (2001) presented a three-stage process for building community online: making friends for a comfortable communication, community acceptance, and camaraderie that is achieved after a long-term relationship. While there have been several attempts to promoting a sense of community in online educational environments, one recommendation resonates with both educational communities as well as gaming communities. This strategy involves designing collaborative activities that promote social interactions. For example, Shackelford and Maxwell (2012) found that learning interactions that are more predictive to a sense of community online involved introductions, collaborative group projects, sharing personal experiences, class discussions, and exchanging resources. Results found that students who communicate through these activities have a significantly higher degree of sense of community. Thus, research supports that SOC can be developed by designing activities that promoted social interaction. Fortunately, one of these activities such as collaborative group projects experiences, manifest in MMORPGs in a similar fashion. In World of Warcraft (WoW), the content at the end of the game requires collaboration in the form of raids. You may equate the collaboration needed for a three-week school project to a three-week progression schedule when defeating a boss in WoW. Both activities require teamwork, and research in the educational context shows that individuals would feel a higher degree of SOC.

Sense of Community in Gaming Communities

Most video game communities are online interest-based communities, and they typically have well-defined memberships. In trying to understand the online SOC in gaming communities, we can look at how players manifest these feelings over time. Depending on the type of game, SOC may be developed in different ways. As mentioned before, MMORPGs have guilds, which allows for organized groups of people to accomplish different goals. Some guilds might have the goal of being solely competitive, and they only allow players who are serious about advancing in the game. Conversely, others might be community-based where the guild is built to avoid competition and create real friendships. Creating a guild is a practical way in which individuals join gaming communities inside and outside of the game. Fong and Forster (2009) examined the online SOC experienced by players of three forms of games: singleplayer, multiplayer, and MMORPGs. All three types of gamers reported experiencing an online SOC based on the game of their choice. Participants in their study were told to take a test that monitored categories like SOC and social support. Those that scored higher levels of these categories tended to agree to with statements like "I have friends in this group...I care about what other group members think of my actions," and "Friends in the game have offered me support when I had a real-life problem or crisis" (Fong and Forster, 2009). These results are important to the overall study because it contradicts the stereotype that gamers are people that are lonely or isolated. Instead, computer games with interactive components, like MMORPGs, might be regarded as just another way in which people can contact each other, whether that be online or offline.

Gaming communities have the potential to provide a strong sense of community in its players. Utilizing qualitative methodology and using what we already know about literature surrounding sense of community, thematic analysis of personal narratives will provide us with key information about how those feelings manifest in online communities. The player experience is imperative for us to better understand how MMORPGs develop SOC in online communities.

Social Identity in Online Communities

Social Identity is a psychological construct that justifies the everyday experiences associated with group membership, identification, and affiliation. Social Identity Theory (SIT) refers to the extent to which an individual's self-identity is defined by belonging to certain social groups (Tajfel, 1978). Essentially, an individual's identity with respect to a particular social group, combines the distinction between someone's personal identity with that of their identity as a member of a group. One aspect of SIT is the process of social categorization in which "in-groups" and "out-groups" are distinguished, and solidarity within in-groups is said to promote an individual's positive sense of self (Abrams and Hogg, 1988). As a result, this promotes self-esteem as well as a more positive social identity (Kaye, Carlisle, and Griffiths, 2019). This means that social identity is important when discussing literature on online communities and gaming communities. This specific context is important because SIT has its merits when considering the extent to which it can explain social processes in contemporary everyday life. An increasing proportion of daily life consists of interacting with others via modern technology, including gaming, so consideration is justified when discussing SIT's utility to explain the connection between social identity and lived experiences.

Previous literature has identified the relationships between the strength of social identity and outcomes for self-esteem and psychological well-being across a range of different contexts (Simsek, 2013; Kong, Zhao & You, 2013). Branscombe & Wann (1991) described that a positive social identity has been found to foster feelings of belonging and self-worth. Obst et al. (2002) examined the social identities and SOC of science-fiction fans. The participants identified as fans of the genre and reported a SOC associated with the topic of fandom. In the study, the more strongly science-fiction fans identified as fans, the greater the SOC associated with fandom they experienced. Furthermore, fans identified more with fandom and experienced a greater sense of SOC than they did with their local neighborhoods (Obst et al., 2002). Science-fiction fandom is a primarily online interest-based community, much like video games.

Within the context of digital gaming in research, gamer identity has been found to promote higher levels of social and psychological investment within the gaming community which facilitates a sense of belonging and self-esteem (Kowert, 2015). One significant area of interest is the extent to which social identity processes operate within MMORPG affiliation and its impact on the individual's social identity. Because the social identity is prominent within other areas of study regarding social identity in online communities, we would expect that gamer identity that comes from engagement in MMORPGs would correspond positively to indicators of wellbeing (Kaye, Kowert, & Quinn, 2017). Gamer identity is also expected to be related to other positive outcomes such as social competence and reduced loneliness. Research has previously found that a positive sense of identity or being a part of a community is associated with lower levels of loneliness (Chipuer, 2001). Often, MMORPGs create a virtual world that is immersive

and has its own story, much like a science fiction book or movie. The game has characters, settings, and environments that manifests a world that gamers are highly interested in. As described in Obst's study, these identities inside a game may contribute to the development of their own personal identities.

Referring back to previous literature, social identity in online brand communities manifests similarly to the development of social identity in gaming communities. Brand communities are social organizations wherein members voluntarily join and retain their membership while deriving benefits from participating in the community (Kim, Choi, Qualls, Han, 2008). According to research on online brand communities, or OBCs, there's a strong connection between social identity and community. For Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), the presence of social identity is an essential factor for considering a social group to be a community. Social identity expresses the strength of social relationships a member has with other members of the community through a shared identity (Dholakia et al., 2009). In OBCs, individuals can develop their identities by participating in these communities, following their norms and values, and by putting time into strengthening their communities (Mousavi, Roper, Keeling, 2017). The strength of the individual's social identity within the brand community is paramount to the participation and identification of the group.

A person achieves a social identity through three components: a cognitive component, an emotional component, and an evaluative component (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000). Cognitively, social identity includes gauging the degree of similarities between other members of the community and dissimilarities with nonmembers, which captures a group-like aspect of social groups (Zaglia, 2013; Mousavi et al., 2017). Such thinking is

seen as the overlap between a person's own self-identity and the identity of the community. The emotional component of social identity takes this process a step further into feelings of belonging and attachment the community, thus leading to a certain level of commitment to the community (Tsai & Bagozzi, 2014). Finally, the last component of social identity is evaluation, where the member evaluates the self-worth that comes from membership in the online community. The process of social identity development in OBCs is similar to how gamers identify with their own communities. Consider video games as being the brand for the given community. Within the video game, members interact with one another and engage in social activities together. Eventually, they may find themselves in more specific groups within the community where they begin the process of social identity. In the context of MMORPGs, guilds may be considered as the spaces where rules are made, followed, and enacted within the game. From there, the members of those communities determine the similarities that they share with the group versus their own self-identity. Lastly, members evaluate the degree of worth that comes from the gaming community, and they ultimately determine whether they want to stay in that community. Parallels can be drawn from the literature on social identity in online communities and social identity in gaming communities.

Self-discrepancy theory is another way we can look at an individual's identity through gaming. Previous research on online groups and identity suggests that in some cases, the representations people make of themselves in-game is a combination of their actual (who I am) and ideal (who I would like to be) selves (Bessiere, Seay, and Kiesler, 2007). In other words, the virtual self is a somewhat idealized actual self. There isn't enough research to fully justify the development of identities in non-MMORPG games,

but the literature does exist in MMORPGs. In MMORPGs, players can feel psychologically connected to their created character, often keeping the same one for months or years. The ability to create characters who embody aspects of a player's ideal selves may have implications for their social identity. Self-discrepancy theory suggests that psychological well-being is closely related to a person's actual identity versus their ideal identity (Higgins & E.T., 1987). Having a created character that represents one's ideal identity may reduce the individual's self-discrepancy and boost feelings of self-confidence and self-worth (McKenna, K.Y.A., & Bargh, 1998). Through gaming, players whose characters display desirable qualities can see themselves as different and increase their sense of self-worth, therefore creating a more positive social identity. As a result, the identities created within the game could have positive outcomes for times when the player begins to communicate with other players in offline settings. Some research has found that online gamers who play with their "real" friends are able to transfer in-game experiences to their social networks outside gameplay (Domahidi, Festl, and Quandt, 2014). Given the abundance of literature regarding social identity in online communities, it's important to take a more examined look into the term *gamer* and explore its importance within the gaming community. This would help those who are not a part of this community to better understand what a gamer is and what is means to be a gamer.

Social Identity in Gaming Communities

Often times, the term gamer will be used in the media in a variety of different ways. They could be referring to gamers as people who play video games versus people who don't. They could also be referring to different groups of video game players like MMORPG gamers versus first person shooter gamers. Or, more recently with the release

of shows based on video games, are gamers those who don't play games but are interested in the universe within those games? The line that defines a gamer is unclear, so it is important to interpret the different ways they are referred to so that we may better understand the concept of social identity in gaming communities.

The term gamer has come to be used by some to identify as a member of the gaming community. The gamer identity and gamer culture has been given a lot of recognition through their integration with media and popular culture. For example, the release of several Netflix shows (e.g., *Arcane, The Witcher*) and Hollywood movies (e.g., *Warcraft*) in the past decade have become some of the most watched shows in the industry. Furthermore, fashion trends such as cosplay have begun to cater to the gaming community as thousands of gamers and video game lovers dress up as their favorite characters and share their looks on social media. Stores like Uniqlo collaborated with the popular video game *League of Legends (LoL)* and sold a variety of *LoL* related merch. Choosing to self-identity as a gamer is a vastly different process than being called a gamer from an outside source. There are many important distinctions between a person who plays video games and does not identify as a gamer and someone who does. Hall (1966) backs this idea up that saying that identification within a specific social group is defined by the individual's self-identity rather than the definitions defined by people on the outside. This social identity becomes part of the individual's self-concept, and it contributes to feelings of belonging and self-worth (Branscombe, 1998). Beyond the social identity, people who identify as gamers are also creating their own personal identities associated with the group. This comprises of personal preferences for different games, interests in genres, and characteristics. As previously mentioned, these allow for

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comparison with other individual's personalities and how they recognize similarities or dissimilarities with others in their community.

The mixture between social and personal identity can be illustrated in the following example. Think about a Korean American college student who is 22 yeas old and is studying Biology. All of these aspects categorizes the student by their social identity. Qualities such as their nationality, profession, and academic major are indicators that determines their identity within the context of society. At the same time, the study might identify as a competitive gamer, and they are particularly interested in MMORPGs. The student enjoys sharing their experiences with their family and friends. The student's interest in the field of gaming and their peers share the same interests are aspects of the student's personal identity. Aspects of the student's personal identity might even manifest in qualities within their social identity as well. Imagine the student is competitively involved in the MMORPG they are playing, and they show a similar degree of motivation and competitiveness within their academic studies. Both of these identity structures allow for the identification within society as well as self-identity with or belonging to certain groups. Therefore, identification as a gamer derives from personal identity as well as the overall societal identity.

According to Hall (1996), social identity is particularly important within public contexts as in a social space, an individual becomes a member within the broader community (Grooten & Kowert, 2015). In the context of gaming, talking about one's favorite gamers can provide a common ground for conversation with one's peers. Playing games together can also help to strengthen peer bonds by providing shared experiences (Fritz, Lampert, Schmidt, Witting, 2011). Additionally, personal performance and

outward expression within the community further contributes to the strength of one's individual gamer identity (Grooten & Kowert, 2015). An individual's personal identity as a gamer not only becomes visible, but is it also potentially strengthened through social interactions. It also provides the opportunity to created shared identity with others in the same circle of gaming. These interactions and relationships can become strong connectors for establishing a gaming community, which helps strengthen a person's social identity (Branscombe, 2015). For gaming communities, symbolism that refers to certain video games may help social groups form. Cosplaying as your favorite game character is one example of how gamers make themselves identifiable as members of a social group. Other examples include listening to video game music (playing *Toss a coin to your Witcher* on Spotify), creating objects (replicas of game weapons or armor), and using game phrases popular to the overall gaming community (the line "Leroy Jenkins" from *World of Warcraft*). Referring to these symbols makes a person a member of the social group of gamers, and it validates their social identity as a gamer within the gaming community.

Much like the physical world, virtual gaming communities also hold a set of shared practices and symbols that lets gamers identify with different groups. Specifically for MMORPGs, guilds have their own banners and coat of arms for members to wear (Wimmer, 2013). This is used to express identification within the guild, while also distinguishing oneself from other guilds. This allows gamers to symbolize that they are a part of a certain in-game group, and it illustrates how aspects of a gamer's in-game identity may be seen in the virtual world. In a broader perspective, *World of Warcraft* has a faction system in which players can choose to identify with one of two factions, the

Alliance or the Horde. Gamers might refer to their choices in-game with other gamers in the physical world to state their allegiance. At communal events hosted by Blizzard, gamers will often wear the colors of their faction to represent their part in the community outside of the game. Guild banners, coat of arms, and faction colors represents aspects of the game within and beyond the game context.

Unfortunately, not all genres and forms of video games are able to project or produce a virtual identity. MMORPGs are especially potent because they allow for specific forms of identity creation and exploration, as it is one of the main purposes of MMORPGs as a genre. When playing other genres of video games, such as strategy/simulation, first person shooter, or puzzle games, the feeling of social identity is unlikely. While it may not be possible in-game, the possibility of a gamer belonging to an online community outside of the game, is possible. For example, speed running is a certain genre of gaming where the player attempts to finish the game in the fastest time possible. These gamers are predominantly single player games, yet there is an entire community of speed runners within different online gaming platforms such as Discord. In this sense, even games that don't have the ability to interact with others in-game can contribute to the production of social identity within a gaming community.

Social Support in Online Communities

Social support can be viewed as the resources that people are able to call on through the relationships they have with others (Cohen and Hoberman, 1983). Recently, online communities have become an important source of social support to cope with emotional distress (Rains & Wright, 2016). Social support includes positive interactions with the intent of helping others. Extensive studies have established a relationship

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between high levels of social support and greater psychological well-being (Cohen and Hoberman, 1983). Social support can be drawn from online sources like online discussion forums (Whitlock, Powers, and Eckrode, 2006), mailing lists (Obst and Stafurik, 2010), and more. These sources have shown to be positively associated with improved wellbeing. It is important to understand some of the literature surrounding social support in online communities so that we may better understand how social support develops in gaming communities.

To start, identification is an important concept that ties directly with how an individual receives support online. According to Cohen (2001), identification with a character is characterized by two characteristics, sharing and loss of self-awareness. Sharing refers to a person's ability to share emotions, perspectives, and goals. Loss of self-awareness refers to temporary replacement away from the self and into a state of heightened emotional and cognitive connection with an individual (Cohen, 2001). These characteristics have the potential to increase a person's willingness and motivation to provide support to someone else. According to research, individuals may help others because of a shared identity (Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce & Neuberg, 1997). According to Cialdini et al. (1997), the self is "dynamic, malleable, and fluid), and shared identity is "a sense of shared, merged, or interconnected personal identities." Perceiving someone else as having a shared identity allows for the individual to see events through the eyes of the other. In other words, you're putting yourself in another person's shoes and are analyzing the feelings associated with that experience. As a result, the act of helping others is fundamentally helping the self. Maner et al. (2002) performed a study in which they manipulated the perception of shared identity by asking participants whether they

had similar or dissimilar thinking styles with the person in need of help. More specifically, participants were told to listen to an interview where a female college student was raising money following a family tragedy. Participants that thought they had similar thinking styles as the student ended up donating more than those who thought they had dissimilar thinking styles (Maner et al., 2002). The evidence for the connection between helping behavior and shared identity can also be identified by the in-group favoritism effect (An & Menidola, 2020). Tajfel (1971) says that individuals are more likely to allocate resources into members of their own group than they are to members outside of their group. Li and Zhang (2018) performed an experiment that examined group identification and how it affected the presence of supportive comments in online forums. They found that participants were more likely to respond to support-seeking messages posted by in-group members (indicated partly by user avatars) than by out-group members. In other words, active members of the forum both provided and received more positive supporting interactions than those who weren't active members. The role of identification and shared identity shapes our perceptions of how individuals give support and why.

Health communication is a great lens to examine when reviewing the literature surrounding social support in online communities. The rapid growth of the Internet has significantly changed the ongoing relationship between doctors and patients. Before the surge of Internet access, doctors were the only source of medication information for diagnosis, prognosis, and treatment (McMullan, 2006). Patients essentially relied primaily on doctors for information on health. However, the Internet now allows patients to access all kinds of health information.

Now, an informed mother can now take an active role in communication with her doctor by making well-informed decisions and asking more questions. Interpersonally, the Internet also has the ability to fulfill the social and relational needs of patients by enabling them to engage in online communities. Primarily in the form of online forums, members can engage in computer-mediated communication and build personal relationships with other members (Demiris, 2006). There, patients can solve personal problems, disclose information, and show empathy towards others in these online communities. Online communities fulfills the social needs of patients by allowing them to exchange positive social interactions with other members of the same community.

Recently, social support studies have expanded their scope to examine the online context. Studies on computer mediated social support (CMSS) suggested that there are benefits gained from CMSS for patients in various contexts (Gooden & Winefield, 2007, Wright & Bell, 2003). Using the Internet, patients can share personal experiences, objective appraisements, and emotional empathy towards patients who are suffering from a similar illness (Braithwaite et al., 1999), Wright & Bell, 2003). Furthermore, the anonymity of online communities allows patients to exchange personal experiences without the fear of being judged or recognized (Braithwaite et al., 1999). As patients spend more time in an online community and communicate with other members more frequently, they have more opportunities to receive social support from fellow members of the same community. We can take some of the takeaways from current research in health communication and apply it to the context of gaming communities.

Social Support in Gaming Communities

The body of literature examining gaming communities has increased dramatically in recent years. Researchers have examined the demographics of MMORPG players, players' motivations for playing, the nature of guilds, and in-game social groups (Yee, 2006; Williams et al., 2006). The literature suggests that a consideration of sense of community, social identity, and social support may provide a better understanding of gaming relationships and how they impact player well-being. One topic is that is worth discussing is the idea of escapism and how social support mediates its negative effects.

In previous sections, we mentioned that one of the primary reasons why players play MMORPGs is to escape reality. While some individuals enter the world of MMORPGs seeking growth opportunities such as achievement, leadership, or new relationships, others play to avoid real world problems. These problems can be career related such as academic or work difficulties. Other problems may include relational problems such as familial or marital issues. Yee (2006) termed this behavior "escapism," and it is the most robust predictor of decreased wellbeing among MMORPG players. The negative outcomes of escapism may actually be mediated by a person's level of social support (Cohen, 2001). Perceived availability of support is one of the most important indicators of positive wellbeing, as it enhances position emotions and feelings of self-worth (Cohen, 1983). Individuals who feel that they are socially supported believe that they are cared for and are valued. Studying MMORPGs has contributed to a better understanding of social support in gaming communities. It has led us to believe that gamers in similar groups can act as supportive agents without having to be traditional support givers such as spouses or caregivers (Longman et al., 2009). Previous studies

have gathered information on general online support, which mixes support for real world and in-game problems such as in-game aggression towards another payer, frustration with character development, hacking, etc. (Kaczmarek & Drazkwoski, 2014). By diving into research surrounding social support within gamers, we may be able to understand how to combat escapism in MMORPGs.

It goes without saying that social support is important to improving an individual's overall wellbeing. The topic of mental health is something that is heavily associated with gamers. Mental disorders are prevalent and potentially disabling conditions worldwide, and suicide prevention remains an urgent priority for mental health research and practice (National Institute of Mental Health, 2020). Identifying and assisting people at risk for suicide, responding effectively to crisis, increasing help-seeking, and fostering connectedness are among the recommended strategies for crisis intervention (Suicide Prevention Resource Center, 2020). According to Joiner et al. (2009), social isolation is the highest predictor of suicidal behavior across various populations. Low levels of belongingness is often caused by a lack of social support within communities. The video game community has taken an active approach to mental health support, crisis intervention, and social support amongst their communities (Carras, Bergendahl & Labrique, 2021). Efforts to address mental health stigma, promote good health, and provide support have been ongoing for years through community-developed and non-profit organizations (Take This, 2020). For example, Healthy Gamer is a mental health platform designed to help the internet generation success. They provide therapy and social support for gamers who suffer from video game addiction, loneliness, lack of support, etc. As a virtual community, Healthy Gamer expresses many aspects of gaming

and Internet culture. They express their group identity through their public interactions around gaming (Grooten & Kowert, 2015). Conversations are conducted online on Discord and may be in the form of video or texts. Chat communication is filled with memes that visually represent humor or emotions. Healthy Gamer also releases recordings of some conversations they had with prominent gamers with intent to spread the word and to let gamers know that they are not alone.

Games are supposed to be fun, engaging, and often challenging. These aspects of games have the potential to contribute to a positive wellbeing by promoting positive mood, relief from stress, and many other effects (Coulumbe et al., 2016). Games offer opportunities for social connection, competence, autonomy, and meaningful roles. All of these are important aspects of mental health. In MMORPGs, leading a guild or performing a specific role in a group (e.g., choosing to heal or tank) are ways gamers benefit from togetherness (Yee, 2006). As result, groups are formed and the teamwork necessary to overcome challenges promote friendship formation and belonging (Kowert, 2014). Together, these factors promote mental health and support in gaming communities. Previous work with the veteran gaming community has shown that playing video games helps gamers cope and recover from mental health issues while providing ways to connect and form meaningful bonds with players who may be struggling with similar problems. The role of the gamer and helping others with mental health is similar to the patient's role in helping others on online health forums. The idea of the shared identity and shared experiences allows for them to support each other during difficult times.

Personal Narratives

The literature examining gaming communities has greatly increased in recent years. Researchers have examined the sense of community, social identities, and social support within these online gaming communities. The literature within these three constructs suggests that a consideration of SOC, social identity, and social support may provide a better understanding of how social relationships are developed. More so, how these online relationships may be similar to offline relationships and how they may be maintained. SOC, identities, and social support are complex interactions that may not be fully explained through quantitative measures. Instead, we can use the personal narratives and lived experiences of gamers to bolster these concepts and it allows us to further understand how gaming is a useful medium for social development.

A qualitative examination would allow for an in-depth exploration of players' experiences of the social relationships they have with each other. This exploration would provide a greater understanding of these relationships, providing a unique perspective more authentic to the experiences of gamers. The results of this proposed study should demonstrate the impact of gaming communities on individuals and how that contributes to meaningful relationships both online and offline. By digging into specific experiences, we can more accurately depict these social interactions and explain why they lead to a stronger sense of community, identity, and support. It will also help us understand the uniqueness in gaming communities and how they separate themselves from other communities. The analysis of the study may uncover the ways in which the constructs operate and how they are experienced differently within different contexts.

Albrechtslund (2010) proposed a study of the way in which narratives are constructed to express identity in the space between games, communities, and players. There are many insights to be gained from the experiences of personal narratives. By looking at the ways in which players exchange narratives, we can learn about the importance of narrative as a fundamental framework for meaningful experience and interaction in people's lives, online and offline. Narratives play a crucial role in how we make sense of ourselves (Albrechtslund, 2010). We need the dynamic features of narrative to address the meaning of our social identity. This is a narrative perspective on the idea of social identities and how individuals make sense of the complexities of their experiences. We understand our own identity through storytelling, both through our own storytelling and the themes that emerge from them (Ricoeur, 1991).

Pietersen, Coetzee, Byczkowska-Owczarek, Elliker, and Ackermann (2019) describe a unique take on the combination of gamer and personal experiences. Video games offer an immersive personal experience that is distinct from other forms of engagement with media (Culig et al. 2013). Unlike books and films, games allow you to become the center of an interactive story. They have the ability to draw your focus towards another world and reality. The stories produced by events within the games often are real stories to players, and when players immerse themselves into a game, they allow virtual reality to become a part of their own reality. Consequently, when a gamer immerses themselves into a game, the game becomes a part of their narrative, creating a unique personal experience that has yet to be extensively explored. This immersive environment the game creates makes it possible for someone to become personally involved with someone else. It's one thing to share a common interest or passion with

someone, but when your personal experiences are intertwined with another person's experiences, it becomes a unique interaction that could promote a sense of community. Spending time playing games with friends leads to deepening friendships as gaming is an activity to any other pastime you perform with friends in person. Personal narratives are significant because it invites the researcher into a conversation where gaming is a core medium that is associated with a person's social identity, social support, and feelings of community.

Research Questions

The present study focuses around the three central concepts of sense of community, social identity, and social support. The first research question is centered around themes and which themes emerge from participants and their personal experiences.

RQ1: What themes of community social identity, and social support emerge from gamers' personal experiences?

The second question specifies the game genre further, focusing on MMORPGs. This question asks how MMORPGs facilitate the three concepts within online communities.

RQ2: How do MMROPGS facilitate sense of community, social identity, and social support within gaming communities?

The third and last question analyzes the experiences of World of Warcraft (WoW) players. WoW is one of the most popular MMORPGs in the gaming industry and has been around for over 15 years.

RQ3: How are these social concepts experienced within WoW and outside of it?

CHAPTER THREE

Methods

This research project examined the experiences of MMORPG-based relationships. The study took a semi-structured qualitative approach that focused on MMORPG WoW players. A total of 10 participants were interviewed. This chapter describes how the study was conducted, including information relating to the participants and their recruitment, interview protocols, analysis methods, and the procedures used to ensure the validity of the data.

Sampling and Data Collection

10 WoW players (7 male, 3 female) participated in the study. The mean age for all participants was 26 years old. Participants played or had played WoW for between 5 and 15 years. All participants were or had been guild members.

Participants were selected using volunteer and snowball sampling techniques. As part of the requirement to participate in this study, all participants needed be 18 years or older, they must have identified as gamers, and they must have had experience being in a WoW guild. There was no exclusion based on the age, race, or ethnicity of the participant. I accessed players by sending out a recruitment message on the online social gaming platform Discord (see Appendix A). Upon sending the message on various servers, participants were encouraged to contact me via direct message and were prompted to complete a brief interest form (see Appendix B). The interest form asked several types of questions about the participant such as (1) demographic information like

sex, age, and race, (2) basic information like their Discord username, in-game character name, and email address, and (3) questions about their history ("do you identify as a gamer?" and "have you had any experience being in a WoW guild?"). Sampling stopped after I had conducted 10 one-on-one interviews with players.

The majority of the data was collected from in-depth, semi-structured interviews. These interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom after the participants schedule their preferred meeting time. Before the interview began, all participants were assured confidentiality and were told that video cameras were not required. During the interview, participants were asked open-ended questions about their experiences being in an online community. Example questions would revolve around the three central constructs of sense of community ("Is there something that connects you and your gaming community?"), social identity ("Would you say that being in this community is a part of who you are?"), and social support ("Do members of your community support you on issues in your life?"). For a complete list of interview questions, see Appendix D. The interviews average 22 minutes, with the shortest being 12 minutes and the longest being 31 minutes.

The interview data was transcribed using the automated transcription software Temi. Transcripts were then checked and edited for any mistakes that could provide errors during analysis. Post-interview notes and comments were used to facilitate the interpretation of the data. All of the data provided during the study were saved on a password-protected computer.

Data Analysis

The role of the researcher is to conduct interviews and identify core themes contained within the data. Interviews behave as the field in which participants may share their personal narratives regarding the constructs of SOC, social identity, and social support.

Analysis began after the first interview and was conducted simultaneously with data collection. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and then analyzed after being entered into Nvivo. After being reviewed several times, thematic analysis was conducted, with line-by-line coding identifying key words, phrases, and sentences (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Themes would need to exhibit recurrence, the same thread of meaning, even though different wording indicated such a meaning, repetition, a repetition of key words or phrases, and forcefulness, "vocal inflection, volumes, or drastic pauses which serve to stress and subordinate some utterances" (Owen, 1984). This analysis was not open and unstructured but was guided by the research question with the central concepts of SOC, social identity, and social support. These concepts served as the primary framework for identifying themes. Coding was also iterative, with the themes contained within the three constructs evolving over the course of the analysis (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). There were two levels of themes contained within the analysis. The core themes centered around the three central concepts of sense of community, social identity, and social support. Then, sub-themes that emerged from each of the core themes were explained below. After a brief description of the theme being discussed, an excerpt or extract from the interview was inserted.

Procedures to Ensure Validity

To ensure validity within the study, I performed a couple actions. First, I performed textual documentation of my thoughts after each interview. This enabled me to better understand the information post-interview and record my ideas. For example, after every interview, I had a separate document containing comments about things I wanted to investigate during data analysis. To further ensure validity, I used peer-debriefing, where I consulted with my thesis advisor during data collection and analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This activity made sure that I was on track with the effectiveness of my analysis.

After writing my results chapter, I conducted five *member checks* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The five participants read through the thematic interpretation of the data and agreed that the findings accurately reflected their experiences. There was little variation in the degree to which each of the participants experienced the themes presented. All five of the participants agreed that the three themes resonated with their gaming experiences.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

The purpose of this study was to contribute knowledge and to further understand how WoW players develop social capital from their communities. Emerging from detailed analysis of interviews, findings indicated the three core themes of *sense of community, social identity, and social support,* along with a number of sub-themes that emerged from each of them. Each sub-theme highlights an important aspect of the core theme that further enhances the significance of community, social identity, and social support.

Core Theme: Sense of Community

All participants reported feeling a sense of community associated with communities within WoW, a feeling that there were several factors that brought WoW players together. This sense of community was described as one of the core aspects of the game, providing participants with a sense of belonging that might have been absent in their social lives offline. In the first excerpt, Matt talks about his general experience with guilds. He associates the activities they do together with teamwork and collaboration. The group performs activities together that contribute to progression in the game, and that creates a sense of group membership similar to a team of coworkers. You're working towards a similar purpose of completing certain tasks, and that brings players together in WoW.

"In terms of World of Warcraft, I was basically in these social groups called guilds, and we would organize together to defeat these bosses in raids. Some of these boss fights were difficult and would take hours to do. So, it's like, you put a lot of effort into that with the group of people that you socialize with, and it brings a sense of camaraderie and community" (Matt, age 33 years).

In this second example, Spencer talks about his personality rather than the activities his guild does together. While the latter is still important to him, he talks about how he doesn't feel like he can fully represent himself in real life. Being online gives him the opportunity to be more comfortable with his voice and to be in a guild where that idea is accepted.

"…in real life I'm shy. I'm a pretty shy person. I think online, I feel like I can voice myself better and I've definitely been in amazing guilds where I feel like I connect to people and talk to people and like just be friends with them like you would in real life" (Spencer, age 19 years).

Sub-theme #1: WoW as a Common Interest

Sense of community can be broken down into three different sub-themes, the first being the idea that membership of WoW communities allowed participants to form new friendships with other WoW players.

"…you're with the people that you form close bonds within the gaming community. I would talk to people in a WoW guild in the same way I would talk to my family" (Stephen, age 29 years).

"It was my friend in college that introduced me to WoW. When we started playing together, it became easier to meet people in our circles that also played WoW. Once you find a common interest, friendships formed, and for me, my friend groups began to expand…I think, at this point, most of the communities I'm in all play WoW, and it's one of the main reasons why I still play the game" (Andrew, age 23 years).

One interesting thing to point out was in Andrew's statement about his community growing once he began involved with WoW communities. The MMORPG experience contains a social component that is generally needed to experience the whole of the

game. For the same reason that Andrew continues to play the game, many participants play the game partly for the community aspect. This is a central theme that continues to be relevant in the other two sub-themes: similarity fosters community and community extended outside of WoW.

<center>*Sub-Theme #2: Similarity Fosters Community*</center>

The second sub-theme that comes from sense of community is about similarities within the group. People will play WoW for a number of reasons. They might be trying to reach endgame content and complete tasks at the hardest difficulty. Others may desire a more casual approach and be amongst people who play the game to socialize and go through the content at a slower pace. Either way, a sense of community arises when those needs are met by those in a person's online community within WoW. As an example, Matt and David talk about their desire for a more hardcore approach in which they work together with their guild to do harder content. Specifically, Matt equates a part of this guild experience as a working relationship where you have to get to know your team members so that you can perform better.

> "I guess what I look for mainly is I look for a certain level of try hardness. I want a group that progresses…if this guy's consistently messing up mechanics, let's just not bring him to raid anymore. Somewhere where messing up has consequences and the guild is expecting you to perform" (David, age 32 years).

> "I do competitive raiding. It's competitive group content and it's at a level that some people don't participate at. Um, I think that kind of drives, you the know, the group to being more cohesive and getting to know each other because you're all relatively skilled at the game and you want to accomplish something that takes a lot of time and effort. Which is kind of like a working relationship" (Matt, age 33 years).

<center>43</center>

Conversely, other participants talked about joining communities that were less focused on difficult content and more centered around being similar to them as individuals. Additionally, players who have been playing WoW for many years have been a part of communities that better fit their current needs in the game. For example, David does currently play for the content, however he also talked about being in a guild that was focused more on the social component, he even admits to having his own guild for that reason.

> "It hasn't always been that way. I used to play WoW pretty casually through up until Legion. I kind of looked for pretty relaxed groups. That's mainly been the cause of most of my time in WoW…I was busy in the military so I couldn't necessarily guarantee that I can always be on at this time…I even had my own guild for a short time for that" (David, age 32 years).

In the next couple excerpts, participants talked about their experience with communities as it relates to themselves. Spencer was in a community that was more accepting towards being gay and being a person of color. Maggs was also in a community of WoW players that had autism like her and talks about how that helped her. They both recount how they felt a sense of comfort and belonging within their respective groups.

> "…like I know a ton of people who have autism and play WoW. And there's a huge community of those people, especially because we do so much better over audio versus in person because we also have a lot of social anxiety. There's a lot of people like that you can connect with...and so I have a lot of friends that I think that if I didn't have WoW, I wouldn't have the social, um skills that I have now" (Maggs, age 40 years).

> "As a gay person, and a person of color, there's been times where I felt alienated by jokes that people made. On the flip side of that, I 've definitely been in guilds where I feel like I can connect and talk to people and be friends with them like you would in real life" (Spencer, age 19 years).

Having similar goals or similar identities is important for players to feel like they are a part of a WoW community. These extracts highlight the role that the mechanics of the

game play in fostering a sense of community. Gameplay mechanisms that force or reward cooperation can facilitate the formation of a community; however, when players just want to be in a group that accepts certain aspects of themselves, that is also possible in WoW.

Sub-Theme #3: Community Extended Outside of WoW

The last sub-theme refers to the idea that online gaming communities may extend outside of WoW. Think of WoW as a catalyst for introducing people into communities, which then has the potential to branch outside of it to enhance a sense of belonging within the group. These interactions manifests itself in both online and offline contexts. Many participants reported that membership of these WoW-based communities extended outside of the game itself. Participants in both Excerpts 3 and 4 reported engaging in other online activities besides WoW, such as playing social games on Discord. Excerpt 4 also demonstrates the significance of various in-game or online communication methods that exist to facilitate communication with members of online communities. Custom voice and channels on Discord generates a sense of community in groups that may have been harder to form in previous communication channels like Skype.

> "If you can gel with them and become friends with them, you know, you can do fun things in the game, or even fun things that are still online but outside of WoW. Um, I played Skribbl.io with friends last night, and you know, things like Among Us or other games. You know, you can just relate, and you can talk to each other about stuff while you're playing those games" (Matt, age 33 years).

> "On weekends, we have a separate chat channel outside of WoW guild stuff, and we play other games like Gartic Phone, where you draw funny strips of comics together…one time we had an Among Us night. These are all people we met through playing the game, a place for people to gather and talk about other things" (Jordan, age 18 years).

Furthermore, these activities may branch into offline interactions. The popular term of "guild meetup" indicates that members of the same guild pick a place to meet so that they can finally see each other for the first time. Excerpt 5 shows that even though activities within the communities extended outside of WoW, the game itself provides a common ground, or a common reason, for members to meet up. WoW as a common ground allowed them to form friendships and eventually meet offline.

> "I've been in guilds where we do, like, you know, offline meetups. We'd go take a weekend off and go to a lake house and hang out and kind of socialize that way. Or we'd do things like go to the Blizzard company convention called BlizzCon and rent out a house there" (Robbie, age 24 years old).

> "I've gone on vacation, um, with some of my friends from the guild. We all went and rented a cabin up in the mountains in Tennessee and had a good time... there were memorable things like singing, drinking, etc." (Stephen, age 29 years).

Overall, participants showed that their online communities extends outside of WoW and develop into more interactions both online and offline. Using WoW as the common ground for initial interactions, playing games with someone you met in game, whether it was to complete activities together or simply chat with others, has the potential to create meaningful friendships and develop a strong sense of community.

Core Theme: Social Identity

All participants reported multiple identities when being in a gaming community. The first identity belongs to the gamer identity. The gamer identity is a complex term that goes beyond a liking for video games. Participants who identify as gamers have been playing video games for most of their life and have made gaming a part of their daily lives.

"I'm 33 now. I probably started gaming when I was 12 or 13…I started with uh, some old, Windows 95 and Windows 3.1 games. I got into Blizzard games at an early age, starting with Diablo, Warcraft, and Starcraft. Most of this was before WoW came out" (Matt, age 33 years).

In Excerpts 2 and 3, Jordan and Stephen recount their experiences as gamers and how they started at a young age. It's interesting to note that their fathers were the reason for their interest in games. Environmental reasons is a prominent reason for interest at a young age and may be seen a form of bonding in parent-child relationships.

"I've always been around video games. My dad, he introduced me to video games into my life very early. I think my first ever video game was on the original Xbox called Perfect Dark" (Jordan, age 18 years old).

"…it was a way that I bonded with my father before he passed away when I was 12. I continued to pick it (video games) up in high school. My mom hated it. Um, but I really liked it" (Stephen, age 29 years).

The second identity belongs to the WoW identity. Participants that represent the WoW identity make WoW their primary game of choice. They reported identifying as members of MMORPG-based social groups within the game. The last identity belongs to the WoW guild identity. In MMORPGs, players may assume multiple roles within their guild. Some are casual players interested in gathering resources that help the guild. Others are interested in Player vs. Player (PvP) content where they battle other people online. These three social identities vary in nature and importance, and all three are present within participants of the study.

Sub-Theme #1: Gamer Identity

All participants identified themselves as gamers. These participants tended to use their time playing a variety of games. Some participants devoted more of their time playing games other than WoW, however some identified as gamers even with WoW as

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their primary game. Participants were actively involved in video game culture such as

wearing video-game inspired clothes, listening to soundtracks, and wearing logos and

designs related to the game.

> "I identify as a gamer just as often as I identify myself as an American. Most of my playlists on Spotify have some sort of combination between anime music and video game music. I like the soundtracks from Halo, the Witcher, and Lost Ark…I also like to put video game logos and stickers on my laptop. One time I even had a backpack with a Horde pin. I think I still own stuff from a video game YouTube channel I used to watch" (Andrew, age 23 years).

> "Just by playing the game with friends and speaking the lingo, we are already representing the gaming community…where I live as a woman, it is fairly uncommon to be a gamer…if I am among friends, I can share a part of me and it is always met with interest and a common love for games" (Abby, age 23 years).

Gaming and the gamer identity is such a significant part of participants' identities that

they chose their careers and relationships because of it. Maggs talks about being a writer

and how video games are a significant part of her writing. She also recounts her previous

romantic relationships with people that she met in games.

> "I'm a writer, and the first word in my biography is that I'm a gamer. With WoW you meet so many different types of people. Sweden, India, Australia, Mormon, Hindu, Jewish. As a writer we draw from what we know. So, to know more people, I have a larger mind palace to draw from" (Maggs, age 40 years).

> "I would say the positive parts of my identity were the friends I made. I even had a boyfriend that, um, I played with for two years. That was really good" (Maggs, age 40 years).

Another aspect of the gamer identity is that it can be a mixed identity between a person's

social and personal identity. Just as culture and vocation can tie into the gamer identity,

the personal identity is no exception. Participants talked about their gamer identity being

closely tied to their personal identity.

> "I'm happy to have found that gaming is a very diverse culture. Um, it's as misconception that most gamers are like, bigoted types. I've definitely had a fair share of negative experiences… but I really like the community I'm in now. I feel

comfortable in that group, and I can come out of my shell" (Spencer, age 19 years).

The gamer identity is complex and is tied to multiple other identities such as your vocational, cultural, or personal identity.

Sub-Theme #2: WoW Identity

While some participants identified themselves as just gamers, others identified themselves as both broad gamers and WoW players. They viewed WoW as a significant part of their identity as gamers. All participants, whether they did or did not identify as WoW gamers, have been playing the game for over 10 years. For David, wow is not only his passion, but is an essential part of his identity as a WoW player.

> "I will get defensive about WoW because, uh, when you play a game for half your life, you kind of associate it to such a degree that part of your identity is in that game. When people insult that game, you feel like you take it personally whether you mean to or not. It definitely has an influence on me" (David, age 32 years).

These participants also indicated that WoW players, and MMORPG players alike, are unique and that there is a difference between a WoW player and a gamer.

> "I used to be a collector. A huge completionist who would finish 100% of the game. In WoW, it's something you have to work on for decades, from release to current content. It's a different skill that's hard to find in games you spend $60 to complete once. In WoW, it's ongoing, the collecting never stops" (Andrew, age 23 years).

Sub-Theme #3: Guild Identity

The guild identity is centered around ideas of camaraderie and community. All participants identified as members of their guilds. This identity is particularly unique and important to players because it belongs to a group or shared identity. Guild activity and identification is especially prominent for players who participate in 'hardcore' content

such as PvP or raids. These forms of content are among the most difficult parts of playing

WoW, so teamwork is vital. For these players, being a member of one of the highest

ranked guilds on the server, or the region, was a great source of pride and

accomplishment. Being a part of the guild was a symbol of achievement.

> "I've accomplished a lot with a group of people that I've been
> with…accomplishments like server first raid kills, in the game where your guild is
> basically the first ones to kill a boss. MMOs are divided up into a bunch of
> servers and regions and it helps track achievements like that" (Matt, age 33
> years).

Part of the guild member identity also depends on the role you play in the guild. Most

players are considered general members and their status depends on what kind of content

they want to do. A "social" player tends to be more casual and is more invested in the

story rather than the endgame content. "Raiders" will participate in high end dungeons

and raids. Others, however, have more specific roles that refer to the organization of the

guild. Think of it like managers, council members, and at the top, guild master. Abby

talks about her experiences as a guild master and talks about her responsibilities as the

leader of a guild.

> "As a guild master in WoW, it becomes less of a game for me and more of
> community management…the biggest responsibility I have is keeping the
> community allow, and it requires time for recruitment and finding people that
> mesh well with the group" (Abby, age 23 years).

This section demonstrates the presence of multiple identities that are involved in gaming

communities. The gaming identity talks about participants' identifications as gamers and

how that affects their personality, career, relationship, and culture within gaming. The

WoW identity takes things a step further and refers to the game itself being an essential

part of their identity. Lastly, the guild identity takes a more organizational approach to

social identity and talks about the roles people assume in their communities.

On a relational level, all participants reported receiving some kind of support from people in their community. Whether the support was online or offline, they felt affirmed and believed that these conversations brought them closer to their community. Social support came in three different forms. The first being game advice, where members would help support others by giving them information about the game. The second form of support came in the form of offline emotional support. Participants were able to talk about their lives outside of WoW, such as topics like work, relationships, or family.

Sub-Theme #1: Game Support

In games like World of Warcraft, there is a lot of information given to you throughout the game. Game features such as raid equipment, gathering resources, and upgrading gear are all mechanics that the player is expected to learn and utilize as they continue to play. For a game that has been out for 15 years and constantly updates, it can be overwhelming for gamers to absorb all the information needed to play. Participants reported receiving advice on the game, especially when they were new to the game.

> "I feel behind not too long ago, and my guild friend spent a few hours helping me get caught up. It was such a boring task so I was thankful to him for getting through the grind with me. I would say, uh, that we've become closer now after that. It gave us time to talk about the game, and also about other stuff" (Fay, age 26 years).

> "You have to do these things called keys in WoW, they're like high end dungeons you should complete for gear. Every week, we always do guild runs so that we can get people their rewards. A lot of people don't have time to do every single key, so we try to make it so that someone is always available to do one with people that are busy" (Abby, age 23 years).

Most participants reported receiving this support from fellow guild members. However, there are features in the game that allow players to help one another in instanced queuing or pick up groups (PUGs). WoW also has a mentor feature that gives experienced players an emblem above their head, meaning new players can go to them for help about the game. Unfortunately, this feature in the game is not implemented well and is something that can be improved to promote social support in game.

Sub-Theme #2: Emotional Support

Participants reported receiving advice about issues "in real life," referring to issues like work, relationships, and family. Guild members also acted as emotional support resources. For example, if a member is feeling frustrated, members are online to hear and listen to them. Stephen reports his experiences at work and talks about how he goes to his community first after a long day.

> "The first place that I go to when I had a bad day at work, or something in my life happened, are the people that I'm friends with online. Besides family, it's the only support structure I have in my life personally" (Stephen, age 29 years).

> "I'm a younger member of the guild, and I know with age comes wisdom and a lot of people in my guild are more knowledgeable of things such as colleges and life. They've definitely helped me out with those things and made me feel better about my decision making" (Jordan, age 18 years).

Sharing these personal experiences with other members built trust in these communities. Upon disclosing information, participants talked about trusting their guildmates more.

> "Some of my best friends I have in my life are people I've met online. I think once you get that trust with someone, even online, they can be some of the best people you'll ever meet. I would encourage anybody to do that. After talking, I felt like I always got a little closer with my community" (Stephen, age 29 years).

> "I think there's something to be said about being anonymous. I felt more comfortable venting to someone and getting stuff off my chest. You kind of just

start talking and it leads to more intimate topics, I don't know how it happened, it just did. Now they're people I trust the most" (Andrew, age 23 years).

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion

Through thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with WoW players, this study examined what themes of community, social identity, and social support emerge from gamer's personal experiences, how MMORPGs facilitate them, and how these concepts are experienced within WoW and outside of it. The findings revealed nine sub-themes that emerge from the three core themes of community, social identity, and social support. First, there were three aspects of community that brought players together. Having WoW as a common interest allowed participants to find common ground with other gamers. While most gamers play a variety of games, playing the same game allowed players to form groups and do activities together within the game. Then, that common interest expands outside of the WoW community. As players developed closer relationships with one another, they began to do things together outside of WoW, such as going on vacations together in real life or having movie nights on Discord. Lastly, we found that similarity was one of the main reasons for community. Gamers have a variety of different goals that they may want to reach in a certain game. For WoW, you can be in a group that only does difficult content, or you can be in a group that is completely casual. Players found community in situations where their goals and personalities aligned with the rest of the group.

Second, three identities emerged from players when asked about their experiences. The gamer identity represents being a part of the gaming culture. Listening

to soundtracks, wearing clothes with WoW logos, are all a part of showing people that gaming is a part of your identity outside of the game. The WoW identity meant that WoW was the primary game that most participants played. They had been playing WoW for over 10 years and it became a significant part of who they are. This led to the guild member identity, where gamers felt a sense of honor and achievement with being a part of a guild in WoW.

Lastly, players received social support in the form of both online and offline help. In MMORPGs, especially World of Warcraft, there's a lot of information players need to know to progress in the game. It can be an overwhelming feeling and members have the ability to give and receive online support. Advice on how to defeat a certain boss, teaching them how the upgrading system works, or helping guild mates run through certain content so they don't have to face it alone. These are examples of in-game support that is helpful for members in their communities. Additionally, offline support was also identified in this study. Topics like work, relationships, or family issues were talked about and participants reported receiving support from guild members. That led to a degree of trust and intimacy important to members in online communities.

The results of this study extend the literature on MMORPG-based relationships within the context of interpersonal communication. This chapter begins by discussing the scholarly implications of this research. Finally, the chapter concludes with the limitations and directions for future studies.

Scholarly Implications

This study demonstrates the applicability of community, social identity, and social support within MMORPG relationships. By doing so, this study provides a solid ground for further study of these three concepts. Together, these three concepts answer questions about how gamers develop relationships at the group, individual, and relational level. Each of these concepts should be researched more deeply to further help us understand how they are experienced.

At the group level, there are many factors of community within MMORPGs that would be significant in future studies. WoW's gaming population increases and decreases at different times. At the start of a newly released expansion or patch (major content update within the expansion), the level of community increases significantly. However, towards the end of the patch cycle, the population diminishes. Furthermore, during these patch cycles, the game undergoes changes that may significantly affect the way gamers play WoW. If the game lacks content, sense of community diminishes. Further research examining which features within WoW promotes or decreases the growth of communities may lead to significant changes as to how future MMORPGs are made.

At the individual level, social identity is important in understanding how relationships are developed in MMORPGs. The extent to which a person identifies as a member of a community influences the degree to which they feel a part of that community (O'Connor, 2015). These identities may belong to a part of the broader gaming community outside of MMORPGs. As mentioned previously, different games and mediums have ways to develop relationships and communities, even though the specific genre may not directly facilitate it. Speed running games are almost always

single player, yet there still hundreds of communities for people to join. There is potential for studies that specifically hone into each of the three identities presented in this study. One study may be performed that focuses on gamers themselves and how they express their identity.

At the relational level, almost all participants in this study received some form of support in their communities. Providing help with advice about the game was frequent, but social support also came in the form of helping members who had issues outside of the game. Personal advice and seeking emotional support was significant in these gaming communities. This confirms previous studies that were primarily quantitative (Longman, 2019, O'Connor, 2015). Performing studies that dive deeper into social support, specifically guild operation and the level of community experienced outside of the game, may give a greater understanding on how relationships are developed in MMORPGs.

Limitations and Future Research

Gaming is an international phenomenon and is experienced in different ways across hundreds of diverse cultures. First, the participants were recruited using volunteer and snowball sampling. Using snowball sampling may have resulted in a sample that only included players from similar guilds. Furthermore, this study only interviewed WoW players that are from America. It is unclear whether the customs and culture of other countries might affect the development of relationships in MMORPGs. Additionally, the current sample consisted entirely of players that belonged to guilds. Therefore, this study does not answer how players experience MMORPGs when they are not a part of guilds. Further research would be required to determine how players from different cultures experience relationships.

The second limitation comes from the method of the study. Qualitative methodology allows us to collect detailed personal experiences from different gamers. However, in the context of gaming and MMORPGs, it only accounts for those specific experiences and does not account for the big picture. It may be hard to convey themes that could potentially contradict the themes in this study. A multi-method approach could be used to help solve this issue. Sense of community is a significant part of this study, and it is based on the group-level aspect of interpersonal communication. Future researchers can incorporate a combination of interviews and surveys to assist in mapping out information within larger contexts.

Lastly, it is important to recognize that this study does not completely account for experiences during the pandemic. Much of the experiences from this study occurred before COVID-19 and almost all of the participants were already established in their current communities. The development of relationships online during COVID-19 opens up a wide variety of perspectives that are unique to these current times. It would be interesting to conduct further research that took these factors into account.

The proposed themes from this study aims to contribute to a new wave of research that combines entertainment and gaming, specifically MMORPGs, interpersonal communication, and organizational communication. These studies have the potential to create avenues for unique, interdisciplinary research that is important to gaming communities both online and offline.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Recruitment Message

Hello, I am currently a master's student at Baylor University, and I am conducting a study that examines the personal narratives and experiences of gamers. If you are interested in participating in this study, please read through the details and eligibility requirements below:

- This study will require a one-on-one interview on Zoom.

- Participants will be asked to recount experiences during their gaming career that promote a sense of community, social identity, and/or social support.

- A follow-up message will be sent after the interview to confirm our findings with the participant.

Eligibility:

- Participants must be 18 or older

- Participants must identify as gamers

- Participants must be involved in a gaming community

Please direct message me on Discord with a brief description about yourself. If you are aware of any other gamers who might be interested in sharing their story, add that to the direct message. Thanks! -Adam

APPENDIX B

Interest Form

Thank you for indicating an interest in participating in this research study. To ensure

eligibility to the study, please answer the following questions:

First and Last Name (optional):

Discord Username:

Email Address and/or Cell (optional):

Sex:

Age:

Ethnicity:

Do you identify as a gamer? Yes/No

Are you involved in an active gaming community? Yes/No

All participants must be informed of their rights to confidentiality prior to the

study.

Please read through the participant consent form and circle below:

Populate Informed Consent Form

YES, I wish to participate in this study

NO, I do not wish to participate in this study

APPENDIX C

Interview Guide

General Questions…
- Tell me about your history as a gamer.
- Tell me about your history playing WoW.

Gaming Community…
- Tell me about your history with online gaming communities.
- Tell me about your guild experience...
  - Who does it consist of?
  - How did you meet them?
  - How long have you been a part of this group?
  - What types of activities do you do with your guild? Does this community interact outside of WoW?
  - Why do you consider them a part of your community?
- What is one of your most memorable moments while being with them?

Sense of community…

- At what point did you feel like you officially became a part of the group?
- What are some things you look for in a community that makes you feel like you belong?
- Is there something that connects you and your gaming community?
- Can you tell me about a time where you felt like you belonged in your community?

Social identity…
- Would you say that a part of your identity involving being a gamer/being in a gaming community?
- How has your gaming community shaped this?
- Do you feel a positive change when you are around your community/Have you felt a positive change in yourself since joining the community?

Social support…
- Do members of your community support you on issues in your life?
- In what ways do these members support you?
- What do you expect from your community when it comes to social support?

Closing…

- Is there anything else that we should know about you and your experiences?
- What information about your online community would you find particularly important or useful?

APPENDIX D

Code Book

Core Theme #1: Sense of Community

Description: All participants reported feeling a sense of community associated with communities within WoW, a feeling that there were several factors that brought WoW players together. This sense of community was described as one of the core aspects of the game, providing participants with a sense of belonging that might have been absent in their social lives offline.

"In terms of World of Warcraft, I was basically in these social groups called guilds, and we would organize together to defeat these bosses in raids. Some of these boss fights were difficult and would take hours to do. So, it's like, you put a lot of effort into that with the group of people that you socialize with, and it brings a sense of camaraderie and community" (Matt, age 33 years).

"…in real life I'm shy. I'm a pretty shy person. I think online, I feel like I can voice myself better and I've definitely been in amazing guilds where I feel like I connect to people and talk to people and like just be friends with them like you would in real life" (Spencer, age 19 years).

Sub-Theme #1: Community extended outside of WoW.

"If you can gel with them and become friends with them, you know, you can do fun things in the game, or even fun things that are still online but outside of WoW. Um, I played Skribbl.io with friends last night, and you know, things like Among Us or other games. You know, you can just relate, and you can talk to each other about stuff while you're playing those games" (Matt, age 33 years).

"On weekends, we have a separate chat channel outside of WoW guild stuff, and we play other games like Gartic Phone, where you draw funny strips of comics together…one time we had an Among Us night. These are all people we met through playing the game, a place for people to gather and talk about other things" (Jordan, age 18 years).

"I've been in guilds where we do, like, you know, offline meetups. We'd go take a weekend off and go to a lake house and hang out and kind of socialize that way. Or we'd do things like go to the Blizzard company convention called BlizzCon and rent out a house there" (Robbie, age 24 years old).

"I've gone on vacation, um, with some of my friends from the guild. We all went and rented a cabin up in the mountains in Tennessee and had a good time… there were memorable things like singing, drinking, etc." (Stephen, age 29 years).

Sub-Theme #2: Similarity fosters community

"I guess what I look for mainly is I look for a certain level of try hardness. I want a group that progresses…if this guy's consistently messing up mechanics, let's just not bring him to raid anymore. Somewhere where messing up has consequences and the guild is expecting you to perform" (David, age 32 years).

"I do competitive raiding. It's competitive group content and it's at a level that some people don't participate at. Um, I think that kind of drives, you the know, the group to being more cohesive and getting to know each other because you're all relatively skilled at the game and you want to accomplish something that takes a lot of time and effort. Which is kind of like a working relationship" (Matt, age 33 years).

"…like I know a ton of people who have autism and play WoW. And there's a huge community of those people, especially because we do so much better over audio versus in person because we also have a lot of social anxiety. There's a lot of people like that you can connect with...and so I have a lot of friends that I think that if I didn't have WoW, I wouldn't have the social, um skills that I have now" (Maggs, age 40 years).

"As a gay person, and a person of color, there's been times where I felt alienated by jokes that people made. On the flip side of that, I 've definitely been in guilds where I feel like I can connect and talk to people and be friends with them like you would in real life" (Spencer, age 19 years).

Sub-Theme #3: WoW as common interest

"…you're with the people that you form close bonds within the gaming community. I would talk to people in a WoW guild in the same way I would talk to my family" (Stephen, age 29 years).

Core Theme #2: Social Identity

Description: All participants reported multiple identities when being in a gaming community. The first identity belongs to the gamer identity. The gamer identity is a complex term that goes beyond a liking for video games. Participants who identify as gamers have been playing video games for most of their life and have made gaming a part of their daily lives.

"I'm 33 now. I probably started gaming when I was 12 or 13…I started with uh, some old, Windows 95 and Windows 3.1 games. I got into Blizzard games at an early age, starting with Diablo, Warcraft, and Starcraft. Most of this was before WoW came out" (Matt, age 33 years).

"I've always been around video games. My dad, he introduced me to video games into my life very early. I think my first ever video game was on the original Xbox called Perfect Dark" (Jordan, age 18 years old).

"…it was a way that I bonded with my father before he passed away when I was 12. I continued to pick it (video games) up in high school. My mom hated it. Um, but I really liked it" (Stephen, age 29 years).

Sub-Theme #2: WoW Identity

While some participants identified themselves as just gamers, others identified themselves as both broad gamers and WoW players. They viewed WoW as a significant part of their identity as gamers. All participants, whether they did or did not identify as WoW gamers, have been playing the game for over 10 years. For David, WoW is not only his passion, but is an essential part of his daily routine.

Sub-Theme #3: WoW guild identity

"I've accomplished a lot with a group of people that I've been with…accomplishments like server first raid kills, in the game where your guild is basically the first ones to kill a boss. MMOs are divided up into a bunch of servers and regions and it helps track achievements like that" (Matt, age 33 years).

"As a guild master in WoW, it becomes less of a game for me and more of community management…the biggest responsibility I have is keeping the community allow, and it requires time for recruitment and finding people that mesh well with the group" (Abby, age 23 years).

Core Theme #3: Social Support

Description: On a relational level, all participants reported receiving some kind of support from people in their community. Whether the support was online or offline, they felt affirmed and believed that these conversations brought them closer to their community. Social support came in three different forms. The first being game advice, where members would help support others by giving them information about the game. The second and third form of support came in the form of offline support. Participants were able to talk about their lives outside of WoW, such as topics like work, relationships, or family.

Sub-Theme #1: Game Support

"I feel behind not too long ago, and my guild friend spent a few hours helping me get caught up. It was such a boring task so I was thankful to him for getting through the grind with me. I would say, uh, that we've become closer now after that. It gave us time to talk about the game, and also about other stuff" (Fay, age 26 years).

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"You have to do these things called keys in WoW, they're like high end dungeons you should complete for gear. Every week, we always do guild runs so that we can get people their rewards. A lot of people don't have time to do every single key, so we try to make it so that someone is always available to do one with people that are busy" (Abby, age 23 years).

Sub-Theme #2: Offline Support

"The first place that I go to when I had a bad day at work, or something in my life happened, are the people that I'm friends with online. Besides family, it's the only support structure I have in my life personally" (Stephen, age 29 years).

"I'm a younger member of the guild, and I know with age comes wisdom and a lot of people in my guild are more knowledgeable of things such as colleges and life. They've definitely helped me out with those things and made me feel better about my decision making" (Jordan, age 18 years).

Sub-Theme #3: Emotional Support

"Some of my best friends I have in my life are people I've met online. I think once you get that trust with someone, even online, they can be some of the best people you'll ever meet. I would encourage anybody to do that. After talking, I felt like I always got a little closer with my community" (Stephen, age 29 years).

"I think there's something to be said about being anonymous. I felt more comfortable venting to someone and getting stuff off my chest. You kind of just start talking and it leads to more intimate topics, I don't know how it happened, it just did. Now they're people I trust the most" (Andrew, age 23 years).

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