Individual behaviors and beyond: Toward a multidimensional view of gamer identity

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Abstract

Aims. “Gamers” have historically been described via consumption habits and other unidimensional definitions such as genres played. Increasingly, researchers understand social identity as situated within multidimensional contexts, including community members’ interactions with other members and society at large.

Methods and results. Our qualitative study involving 434 fighting game community members suggests this expanded, more multidimensional view of social identity is a more accurate reflection of how people who play games view their identities. Our findings focused on four themes of gamer identity: (1) behaviors, (2) player motivations, (3) centrality, and (4) negative perceptions.

Conclusion. Our research complements more recent research on gamer identity incorporating individual-level gaming habits or preferences and group-level identities emerging from out-of-game and/or in-game worlds. In this way, we consider the influence of multiple contexts on individual identity. Understanding the influence of various social contexts can provide better insight into the multidimensional nature of gamer identity.

Keywords: stereotypes, fighting game community, gamers, social identity, groups

Highlights

- While gamer identity has historically been defined largely through game consumption, fighting game community members describe several individual- and community-level factors that influence the meaning of the term to them.
- Motivation to play games play a part in one’s understanding of the “gamer” identity, mirroring and expanding upon previous research examining why people play video games.
- Multiple contexts, both inside the game world and in interpersonal relationships with other players, were important in determining the meaning of the “gamer” identity.

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Identities are social labels both constructed by us and placed upon us by society. There is a growing effort to understand identity as a reflexive understanding of oneself beyond one or a series of traits assigned to a person (Rutter & Bryce, 2006). Identity can be imagined as a conscious sense of self (which some social psychologists define as personal identity) and solidarity with a group's ideals and perspectives (which some define as social identity; Zucker, 2004). Social identity theory examines how belonging to social groups influences personal identity (Trepte, 2006). Social identity, then, is "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63). It provides individuals a definition of who they are through understanding the defining characteristics of their identified categories (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995).

The "gamer" identity has historically been conceptualized using a self-identity framework, focusing on players' video game consumption and playing habits (De Grove et al., 2015; Rutter & Bryce, 2006). Shaw (2013) suggests one is not born a "gamer," but becomes one, primarily through video game consumption. There is increasing evidence that this traditional, one-dimensional definition does not tell the whole story, however, as gamers often interact with one another, both online and offline (Entertainment Software Association, 2016; Koch, Pongratz, McCauley, & Achtenhagen, 2020; Steltenpohl, Reed, & Keys, 2018), and with friends and family (Wang, Taylor, & Sun, 2018). Additionally, motivations for playing games are varied (Koch, Pongratz, McCauley, & Achtenhagen, 2020; Yee, 2006). Previous research suggests having people with whom to share one's identity is important (De Grove et al., 2015; Rutter & Bryce, 2006; Shaw, 2012b), and that these identity concepts develop and evolve over time (Harper, 2010; Koch, Pongratz, McCauley, & Achtenhagen, 2020). It is time for researchers to do the hard work of understanding how different, specific gaming communities may conceptualize their identities and how these conceptualizations may change across environments.

How one conceptualizes one's individual identity appears to be inextricably connected to one's social context (Lyons, Schweitzer, Urick, & Kuron, 2019). People may create identities via shared interests (De Grove et al., 2015) and shared contexts and experiences (Philpin, Merrell, Warring, Hobby, & Gregory, 2014). They can form identities based on perceived rejection by others (Schmitt, Spears, & Branscombe, 2003) and/or hate for the same things (Harman & Jones, 2013). In contrast, people may show indifference to group identities (Fenton, 2007) or reject them outright (Finlay, 2005). Conflicts between one's experiences and prevailing definitions of identity may arise if one does not conform to expectations (Condis, 2015; Ford, Harris, Webb, & Jones, 1994) or attempts to enter a new environment (Badea, Jetten, Iyer, & Er-rafiy, 2011). Research on these multidimensional complexities can advance our understanding of identity.

Consistent with Lyons and colleagues (2019), Grooten and Kowert (2015) argue for a broad understanding of gamer identity including gaming habits or preferences, and group identities emerging from physical/out-of-game and virtual/in-game worlds. These multidimensional aspects interact to influence one's identity as a gamer. In Grooten & Kowert's (2015) model, how gamers inhabit their virtual and physical realities influences how they identify. For example, gamers aware of stereotypes about gamers may "[identify themselves] or a group in contrast to these [stereotypes] or [attribute] the stereotypes to others rather than to [themselves]" (p. 82). The term gamer has historically been associated with white, straight, able-bodied, teenage males who play video games (Shaw, 2010). However, this stereotype has been

challenged in recent years, giving rise to several controversies (as described in Dockterman, 2014; Richard, 2015; Shaw, 2012a; Shaw, 2012b).

There is no reason to assume *any* group would uniformly adopt a label. As an example, what it means to be a “feminist” has undergone change and division depending on historical, cultural, political, and social contexts. Whether individuals consider themselves “feminists” is conditional on conception(s) they hold of feminism, their individual values, and societal norms. Someone may identify specifically as a second or third wave feminist, or intentionally weave intersectionality or transnationalism into what it means to be a feminist. Others may espouse values commonly considered feminist, but self-identify as a different label, such as “egalitarian” (Zucker, 2004), or perhaps reject the use of any label. Further, experiences around other aspects of one’s identity, such as race or sexuality, may affect how one interfaces with feminism (see Black feminism, e.g., Porter, Green, Daniels, & Smola, 2020). Similarly, it is reasonable to expect that not all people who play games accept the “gamer” label. More specifically, how one interfaces with the gaming community (e.g., through specific communities, like the fighting game community) and one’s experiences inside and outside of these communities may influence one’s conceptualization of what it means to be a “gamer” or whether one feels it is an appropriate label to use.

Within the gaming world, one might make a distinction between casual and hardcore game players. Some genres, such as hidden object games, may more easily be placed into the casual subcategory, which is more often associated with female players (Chess, Evans, & Baines, 2016). Gaming communities may also be segmented into more specific groups, such as communities of players who enjoy particular genres (e.g., shooters, roleplaying games) or franchises (e.g., *Mass Effect*, *Pokémon*). For example, O’Connor and colleagues (2015) found *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*) players expressed social identity at multiple levels: as gamers, as *WoW* players, and as guild (in-game groups) members.

The fighting game community (FGC) is one such group of the larger gaming world. FGC members play fighting games (e.g., close combat games like *Mortal Kombat*, *Persona 4 Arena*) and interact with other players in many ways, including attending in-person gaming nights, participating in online streams, and posting on social media. Because of its historic roots in arcades, which historically had a much lower cost to play than console and PC gaming, the FGC has been noted as including more low-income and people of color than other gaming communities (Bowman, 2014; Kong & Theodore, 2011; Skolnik & Conway, 2019). Additionally, FGC members explicitly resist the formation of fighting game esports to avoid the influence of game developers, broadcasters, sponsorships, and money in general on their community (Toms, 2019). Rather than high-profile tournaments centered on spectating top players, most events include opportunities for all attendees to play (Bowman, 2014).

Meta-stereotypes are the usually disparaging stereotypes in-group members believe out-group members have of in-group members. Given negative stereotypes against gamers and of FGC members more specifically (Steltenpohl, Reed, & Keys, 2018), it is important to note meta-stereotypes can negatively affect self-perceptions (Haslam, Oakes, Reynolds, & Turner, 1999; Torres & Charles, 2004). Many FGC meta-stereotypes overlap with those about the general gaming community (Steltenpohl, Reed, & Keys, 2018). Given this overlap, it is entirely possible some FGC members reject the gamer identity label to avoid some of these stereotypes. In other words, there are a variety of ways FGC members may react to the usage of the gamer identity label, and these reactions may be affected by personal and social contexts.

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In short, the fighting game community appears to be a promising focus for studying gamer identity as it is an underdog, diverse community within the world of gaming that may give rise to varied perspectives on gamer identity. As such it is an appropriate community to examine to ascertain whether fighting game community members have a uni- or multi-dimensional view of gamer identity and, if the latter, recognize and peel back some of the multiple layers of gamer identity. Our focal research questions are: How do members of a gaming community (here, the FGC) envision the gamer identity label? Further, how do they envision their relation to the term?

Method

Respondents

A total of 434 respondents answered the open-ended survey question, “What does being a gamer mean to you?” Respondents were diverse on several demographic characteristics (*Table I*). Respondents averaged 24.50 years old ($SD = 5.15$, range 18-41) and reported varying levels of time spent on video games in general and on fighting games specifically. Respondents averaged playing video games for 18.93 years ($SD = 5.32$, range 0-37) and fighting games for 11.27 years ($SD = 7.37$, range 0-28).

Respondents interacted with their top community in a variety of ways, including in-person gaming nights, streaming, and social media, each of which roughly three quarters of respondents used to interact with their communities. Respondents came from a variety of specific fighting game communities; most popular were communities relating to *Street Fighter*, *Super Smash Bros.*, *Guilty Gear*, and *Mortal Kombat*.

Materials

Due to concerns about drive-by research expressed by FGC members (e.g., FGCRequiem, 2014), we leaned into a more participatory framework that allowed for FGC members to help shape our research process to explore various aspects of FGC involvement and identity. The first and third authors worked with FGC members to create an original online survey, “2016 Fighting Game Community Online Survey,” which can be accessed on the Open Science Framework (Steltenpohl & Keys, 2017). The question analyzed for this study is, “What does being a gamer mean to you?” Obtaining open-ended responses from many fighting game community respondents enabled us to obtain multiple perspectives on gamer identity without prejudging the nature of those views.

Procedure

After obtaining IRB approval and support from FGC leaders, we used a broad, convenience sampling strategy by inviting people with experiences with the FGC to participate in the English-based study via postings on social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, various FGC-related subreddits) and on gaming sites like *Game Informer* (Futter, 2016). Respondents who identified their “top community” as a game that is not a fighting game (e.g., *League of Legends*) were excluded from the sample.

Analysis

The first author created a codebook using open coding and data reduction, paired with iterative practices as themes emerged that aligned with previous research (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). Codes were created if they were mentioned three or more times within the 434 responses; codes were then discussed as a lab, where merging and demarcation occurred through

discussion and consensus building. In line with consensual qualitative research approaches, the second author independently examined the data and checked his own understanding against the codebook (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997; Williams & Morrow, 2009). The first and second authors met to discuss codes until consensus was reached, with the third author acting as an outside auditor. The full codebook is accessible on the Open Science Framework (Steltenpohl, Reed, & Keys, 2017). In line with our positionality as researchers, described below, the intent of our thematic analysis strategy was to describe participants' experiences, rather than attempt to interpret (and possibly overinterpret) meaning.

Further, to enhance the accuracy, constituent validity (Keys & Frank, 1987), and credibility of the analysis, we took the following steps. FGC members were invited to participate in member checks three times throughout the process. When designing the survey, we asked several FGC members to provide feedback on question wording and relevance to community needs. We also sought members' comments on initial results of the coding process. Finally, we shared a manuscript draft with FGC members for their reactions. Members reported their perspectives and/or those of their acquaintances were represented and asked questions to clarify specific terms and concepts. To aid with comprehension of the findings, we have included the participant's self-reported age, gender, location, and years within the FGC.

Researcher Positionality

The three authors have varying levels of engagement with different gaming communities. The first author has been playing video games since she was four years old, has been involved with gaming-related forums since 2003, and has written for a few gaming websites. The second author plays a variety of video games and has been active on several gaming-related subreddits; and the final author has had experience gaming with family members. While none of the authors identify as FGC members, the first two authors attended an anime fighting game tournament and the first author has personal and professional contacts within the community and attends local FGC-related events. All three authors believe communities should be provided an opportunity to speak for themselves and have made concerted efforts not to overinterpret qualitative responses. The authors' positionality helped them establish working relationships and build trust with FGC members in the wake of difficult problems with previous researchers the community had encountered. Consequently, we believe the data from an open-ended survey question was likely to convey community members perspectives in an open and authentic manner.

Results

A total of four themes emerged from our data analyses. Our first research question concerned how FGC members envisioned the gamer identity label. To this end, two definitional themes emerged: (1) behaviors, i.e., activities relating to being a gamer; and (2) player motivations, adapted from Yee's (2006) motivations for play in online games. Our second research question concerned how FGC members envision their relation to the term gamer. Two conceptual themes emerged: (3) centrality, or how important the gamer label was to them; and (4) negative perceptions, focusing on stereotypes about gamers. Affective statements were found across all four themes, suggesting emotional reactions—positive and negative—to the “gamer” identity label.

Definition via behaviors

At the heart of the gamer identity label is a specific activity: gaming. Therefore, a large portion of descriptions of the gamer identity label focused on two behaviors: playing the games themselves, and consuming and creating games and game-related products (e.g., art, streams, etc.; De Grove et al., 2015; Harper, 2010; Rutter & Bryce, 2006; Shaw, 2013).

Playing games

Respondents expressed a variety of opinions about which types of games “counted” toward being identified as a gamer. Most respondents either expressly stated it did not matter which games someone played or did not mention playing specific games or genres as antecedents to claiming the identity. One respondent went as far to say, “It means I play video games the fuck you mean?” (23, male, US, 3 years in FGC). Others did not respond as strongly, although shared a similar sentiment: “Someone who plays games. Period. Like many gamers, I feel the instinct to consider mobile gaming less 'valid' than PC and console games, but ultimately it's a True Scotsman argument to claim anyone who plays games 'doesn't count'” (25, male, US, 18 years in FGC). While this respondent resisted his instinct to consider mobile gaming as less valid than other games, a couple respondents did make the distinction. One respondent noted, “A gamer IS NOT someone who plays *Clash of Clans* [a popular mobile game] on the toilet or while waiting for something else to happen” (19, male, Australia, 3 years in FGC).

In addition to anti-mobile gaming sentiment, a few other distinctions emerged in respondents’ reactions, although to a much lesser extent than those who felt it did not matter what genres or games were played. A few respondents insisted gamers were also required to have an appreciation for multiple genres or games, i.e., positive affect and gaming behavior, although it did not appear to matter *which* genres or games. One respondent stated a gamer is “someone who enjoys and actively plays (or at least tries to, depending on time availability) a variety of video games” (29, male, US, 10 years in FGC). Another suggested gamers should “just enjoy playing games and give every genre a chance” (22, male, US, 6 years in FGC).

Lastly, a few respondents made the distinction between casual and competitive, hardcore, and/or fighting gamers. One respondent described gamers as simply “playing more than just ‘casual’ games” (33, male, US, 23 years in FGC), while another expanded upon this idea, stating, “To me there is a huge difference between gamers and ‘competitive gamer.’ Video games are fun, but for me, the challenge of playing against another conscious human being, in which you both want to win, and are forced to try to find a way to beat the other person while at the same time adapting to different situations is much more rewarding than say, trying to defeat a boss so that you can get to the next level. The satisfaction I get from playing at a high level against another person and having a long, thought provoking match, is something that I've yet to find in any other game that's not a fighter” (21, male, US, 10 years in FGC).

Consumption and creation

Many respondents discussed the consumption and creation of game-related products through buying games and creating and consuming art, streams, and games. A few respondents specifically listed buying games or investing money as an aspect of being a gamer, although not all were happy with this. Some identified gaming identity as a consumerist/capitalist label, with one respondent warning people against using games as an identity. A few other respondents mentioned creating or consuming gaming-related products like art, news, streams, and videos,

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whether in addition to or instead of playing the games themselves. As one respondent put it, “I work in game development and I'm a competitive gamer” (24, trans woman, US, 16 years in FGC).

Definition via player motivations

As we coded, clear themes echoing Yee's (2006) three motivations of online play emerged: social, achievement, and immersive motivations.

Social

Those who referenced social aspects of the gamer label focused on three types of social interactions: community, culture, and mentorship. Most respondents who focused on community sought to bond with other players and share their love for their favorite games or genres. As one player put it, aside from playing video games, being a gamer means “being engaged with the people that play the best games in the world” (no demographic information provided).

A few respondents who discussed social aspects of being a gamer referenced having familiarity with gaming culture, whether that involves knowledge of the history, inside jokes, memes of the community, or understanding game design and techniques. One respondent explained, “Being a gamer means understanding the culture, design sensibilities, and appeal of games while being able to discuss them at some level” (no demographic information provided).

A few also listed mentorship as an important part of being a gamer. For example, one respondent said,

“Being a gamer is about the experiences you get when playing games by yourself and with others. Teaching and learning from others is such a rewarding experience that you can't get everywhere. Video games are so commonplace and universal that almost anyone can play and enjoy” (27, male, US, 3 years in FGC).

Achievement

Roughly the same number of respondents who mentioned the social aspects of being a gamer mentioned aspects of being a gamer relating to achievement, namely competition, improvement, knowledge, and skill. Of these themes, respondents largely focused on competition and improvement, unsurprising for a gaming community revolving around competing in tournaments. One respondent playfully said being a gamer “means expressing [one's] inner smugness in the form of beating others” (21, male, US, 5 years in FGC). Competition was often—but not always—intertwined with improving oneself. As one respondent put it, “I love to improve and compete” (30, male, Sweden, 18 years in FGC). Those who mentioned improvement focused on challenging oneself to get better at the game(s) they enjoyed. As one respondent put it, it is important for gamers to “[rise] to a challenge and [continue] to work on it and improve oneself until the challenge is surmounted” (22, male, US, many years in FGC).

To a much lesser extent, respondents mentioned having attained knowledge or skill, without reference to the process of improving either. Regarding knowledge, respondents mentioned understanding game strategy and how the games are made. As one respondent shared with us, being a gamer means “discuss[ing] the finer points of individual games [...] from an experienced and veteran perspective” (19, male, Canada, 2 years in FGC). Regarding skill, respondents mentioned earning achievements or trophies (an expression and consequence of

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skill). As one respondent put it, “You are a gamer when gaming becomes almost second nature” (19, male, US, 9 years in FGC).

Immersion

Most respondents who discussed immersion as an aspect of being a gamer referenced games being fun, with a few others mentioning immersion within the games or escape from real life responsibilities. Those discussing fun highlighted the importance of enjoying oneself while playing games or enjoying gaming-related products, whether by oneself or with others. Those mentioning immersion discussed a desire to get lost in storylines, explore the game world, or experience the game itself. Finally, many of those who mentioned escape referenced having stressful lives and expressed a desire to relax and/or distract oneself from their responsibilities. As one respondent rather dramatically put it, “to escape the damning reality of crushing defeat is always more fun if you can’t ever completely die” (no demographic information provided).

The above findings highlight the variety of ways in which fighting game community members might conceptualize the “gamer” identity. FGC members discussed behaviors, including playing games and consuming and creating games and game-related content, and discussed motivations for playing games as a part of the meaning of the term. When considering how FGC members envision their relationship to the term, two more themes emerged.

Conceptualization via centrality

The centrality of gamer identity varied across respondents. Most did not reference how important the identity label was to them, but of those that did, there was a roughly equal split between respondents who embraced the gamer identity label and those that did not.

Central

Some respondents described the gamer identity label and gaming itself as one of the most important aspects of their lives, with gaming taking priority over other activities. For these respondents, gaming was their primary form of entertainment and/or being a gamer was among their primary labels. One respondent shared, “It means video games are not only my most used form of entertainment, but the one that has the most impact on me emotionally and socially” (20, male, US, 5 years in FGC). Another said something similar, putting playing (not making) games on the same level as making art or music:

“It means games take up a large[r] focus of my life then [sic] other hobbies. Just like an artist will spend most of his time making art, a musician making music or a writer writing, a gamer will spend most of his time playing games” (24, male, US, 2 years in FGC).

Important but not central

Slightly more respondents suggested being a gamer is an important identity but did not specifically reference it as one of the most important. Respondents who reported this second level of centrality noted gaming was a major or influential part of their lives, or they have been gaming for a significant portion of their lives. One stated, “Gamer means that video games are an important and influential part of my life and perspective” (22, male, US, 5 years in FGC). Some, however, specifically asserted that being a gamer is no more important than any other identity category.

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Not important

About half of respondents who did reference the centrality of the gamer identity label did not care for the term and/or did not use it to describe themselves. Some referenced the growth of gaming as a hobby as a reason for ignoring the label, e.g., “It doesn’t mean anything considering the huge amount of people that play video games in some manner” (27, male, US, unknown time in FGC). One pattern of responses indicated playing only fighting games made the broad term less relevant. One respondent said, “I don’t consider myself a gamer as I rarely play games when they release except for fighting games” (34, male, US, 24 years in FGC). A few respondents did suggest alternative labels, namely distinguishing between casual and competitive players or identifying as FGC members.

Conceptualization via negative perceptions

A few respondents shared negative perceptions of the gamer identity. These negative perceptions consisted almost entirely of popular stereotypes of gamers being toxic, exclusionary individuals who take their hobby too seriously. As one respondent said,

“The term 'gamer' has a lot of negative connotations - selfish, socially oblivious, self-important, and introverted to a point where there can be a disconnect with the 'real' world. I don't use the term 'gamer' to describe myself. I'm somebody who plays video games very seriously, but I also read books and watch films very seriously. I don't feel the need to shout that out to the world” (24, male, UK, 7 years in FGC).

Most of the respondents who focused on these negative perceptions also stated they distanced themselves from the gamer identity label, although the overlap was not perfect. About two thirds of respondents who distanced themselves from the gamer identity label also mentioned negative stereotypes about gamers.

Discussion

We were interested in exploring, in broad terms, how members of the FGC conceptualize the gamer identity label and their relation to the term. Their perspectives as members of a specific gaming community are valuable to understanding how the “gamer” identity might be conceptualized differently within these communities when compared to how researchers often conceptualize the term. Our findings focused on four themes: (1) behaviors, (2) player motivations, (3) centrality, and (4) negative perceptions.

As one might expect with an interest-based community, the most salient aspect of community identity did revolve around engagement with the interest. In other words, the consumption of video games was commonly endorsed as a component of gamer identity. Respondents did describe gaming as a primary activity for “gamers,” but also mentioned consuming and creating games and game-related products like art and streams. That many respondents seemed to equate game *consumption* to the *creation* of other artforms (music, art) is an interesting perspective and further complicates the idea of consumption-based identity; further research is needed to disentangle these concepts.

Respondents also focused on motivations to play, such as being a part of a community and interacting with other players, achievement (e.g., competition, improvement, knowledge, and skill), and immersing oneself in the gaming experience. Respondents differed on how central the term “gamer” was to their identity. Most respondents did not mention centrality specifically, but those who did were roughly split between those who embraced the label and those who did not.

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Finally, a few respondents shared negative perceptions of the gamer identity label, associating the label with stereotypes about gamers generally. Two thirds of these respondents distanced themselves from the gamer term.

Interestingly, despite the focus on a specific gaming community, our results regarding player motivations were congruent with Yee's (2006) three motivations of online play: social, achievement, and immersive motivations. Respondents who emphasized social aspects of gaming discussed community, culture, and mentorship as important parts of their experiences as gamers. Respondents who focused on achievement mentioned competition, improvement, knowledge, and skill, perhaps unsurprising for a competition-focused community. Respondents who drew attention to immersion discussed the importance of fun, with a few desiring immersion within games themselves and escaping from reality. The motivation-related responses were additionally characterized by their affective nature, which suggests emotional attachments and responses are important to consider while trying to understand how someone identifies.

While these motivations may not fit a traditional idea of social identity, they do highlight that gamers inhabit multiple worlds: out-of-game worlds where players interact with others in cooperative and competitive ways, and in-game worlds where players can test their abilities, improve themselves, and lose themselves in the game. These worlds interact with one another to influence one's identity.

This contextual influence aligns with Grooten & Kowert's (2015) discussion of gamers as a community identity and Harper's (2010) discussion around performing identity. In Grooten & Kowert's (2015) model, games provide a common ground by which people can connect with one another, creating a culture and shared identity. This shared environment can happen within the game world, through computer-mediated forms of communication like social media and streaming, and through in-person interaction within gaming communities. Within these contextual settings, gamer identity may better be described from a discursive perspective, with the understanding that social identity is socially constructed and intended to lend meaning to experience (Colombo & Senatore, 2005, Grooten & Kowert, 2015). The interactions of one's multi-layered social contexts can be positive or negative, as shown by respondents' acknowledgement of positive (e.g., "fun") and negative (e.g., stereotypes of gamers) aspects of being a gamer.

Additionally, different layers of these shared social contexts might be more salient to one's construction of gamer identity. There is research suggesting gamers may more readily identify with specific gaming communities over the general gaming community. For example, some *World of Warcraft* (a popular Massive Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game, or MMORPG) players felt a greater sense of community and social identity with other *WoW* players and specific in-game communities, such as guilds, than the general gaming community (O'Connor, Longman, White, & Obst, 2015). One can imagine different communities might have different modalities for communication, thus different influences on community members' identities. For instance, the FGC has grown largely from arcade culture (Bowman, 2014), while a massively multiplayer online game like *World of Warcraft* is often touted as an entirely online game. However, in addition to interacting with each other in person, FGC members talk to each other through social media and in-game voice chat during online play. *World of Warcraft* players often interact with each other outside of the game environment in online and offline contexts (O'Connor, Longman, White, & Obst, 2015).

Some respondents in our study noted "everyone games," and suggested the norms for who "gets" to be a gamer might be loosening or shifting, and probably have been for several

years (De Schutter, 2010; Milner, 2013). That said, there were still respondents who felt to be called a gamer, one should, for example, not play primarily mobile games, or should be well-versed in a variety of games and genres. Still others distinguished between casual and competitive gaming. We would expect the prevalence of the aforementioned perceptions to change depending on what community is being examined, which points to the importance of exploring the perceptions of specific gaming communities, rather than focusing on an increasingly amorphous entity like “gamers.” These results are again congruent with Grooten and Kowert’s (2015) discussions of gamers as people who *self*-identify with the gaming community based on perceived shared characteristics with the group. Thus, our findings reinforce and expand upon the idea that a movement away from conceptualizing gamer identity as simply “consuming games” may lead to a better, deeper understanding of what it means to use (or not use) this label.

Even as the “face” of a gamer changes (Entertainment Software Association, 2016), negative stereotypes remain (Dockterman, 2014; Grooten & Kowert, 2015; Richard, 2015; Shaw, 2012a; Shaw, 2012b; Steltenpohl, Reed, & Keys, 2018). Respondents who found negative stereotypes salient typically distanced themselves from the label, despite all indications they fit the traditional description of a gamer (that is, they play games), choosing instead to talk about other gamers. This distancing illustrates Grooten and Kowert’s (2015) discussion of gamers’ differentiation of themselves from stereotypes about gamers.

Implications and Future Research

As researchers, we seek to be mindful of the labels we use. A proposed best practice for researchers may be to include a question asking how someone may refer to their own social identity. To draw a parallel with Zucker’s (2004) study of feminist identity, someone may prefer the label egalitarian rather than feminist, or may identify as feminist but want to specifically say they are a third-wave or an intersectional feminist. Understanding labels people use regarding their social identity helps articulate the complexities of membership and may be useful in gaining entrée into gaming and other communities (Quandt, McDonald, Bell, & Acury, 1999).

Future research should focus on other specific gaming communities, to explore how identity functions in these communities and what similarities and differences we may find when comparing different groups. Even within the fighting game community, there are several subcommunities, including communities for whom English is not the primary language. There are many avenues, then, for a deeper, more specialized exploration within gaming communities that we hope to explore and encourage other researchers to do as well.

Beyond sampling from other gaming communities, future research on gamer identity could benefit from a more ecological approach, exploring how individuals may feel about their gaming identity in a variety of contexts, how game developers market gamer identity, how society represents gamers and how these have (or have not) changed over time.

Most respondents who provided their gender identity used a masculine label. This finding is in line with previous research suggesting less than 5% of competitive FGC players are female (Kong & Theodore, 2011) and research suggesting there are very few women in competitive gaming spaces (Jansz & Marte, 2005). Our mixed-methods study was, due to a rather limited body of research around the fighting game community, intentionally broad-based, with the purpose of obtaining a variety of perspectives on different, broad topics.

Future research may focus specifically on the ways women and individuals identifying as trans and/or non-binary navigate these spaces. Some researchers have looked at gender and game

consumption broadly (e.g., Royse, Lee, Undrahbuyan, Hopson, & Consalvo, 2007), while others have taken deeper dives into how gamer identity is influenced by other characteristics like gender, race, and sexuality (Shaw, 2012a). Previous research suggests gaming communities can be harsh environments for women (Cote, 2017; Fox & Tang, 2014; Fox & Tang, 2016). Discussions about gender-based harassment in online gaming space show members often focus on the “authenticity” of membership (i.e., whether women are “real gamers”), a dismissal of potentially sexist behaviors (instead describing them as acceptable for everyone in these communities), and a tentative acceptance of gender as a component of gender-based harassment (Nic Giolla Easpaig, 2018). Kaye and Pennington (2018) suggest using social identity theory to differentiate in-group and out-group categorization and multiple social identities theory to soften the effects of discrimination against women-identified players. For example, social identity theory might suggest it would be helpful for gaming communities to broaden their notion of who “counts” as a “gamer” to reduce the application of gender-based stereotypes. Multiple social identities theory would suggest that female-identified gamers might highlight their gamer identity over their female identity to avoid the application of gender-based stereotypes.

Research further suggests a link between identity and wellbeing (Kaye, Carlisle, & Griffiths, 2017). Therefore, it would be beneficial to research the link between gaming identity and wellbeing, particularly around the usefulness of gaming community-focused interventions. Understanding the relationship between identity and wellbeing will allow us to understand how members who are in the minority in online and/or gaming spaces identify within these communities and the effects that has on health and social outcomes. It may also help us develop interventions that can improve the wellbeing of people of all backgrounds who play games.

The multidimensional findings of this FGC-specific study are in line with Grooten and Kowert’s (2015) conceptualization of gamer identity, which integrates individual gaming habits and preferences with group identities emerging from physical and virtual worlds across gamers *in general*. They also reflect Yee’s (2006) previous research on gaming motivations among MMO players and make more explicit specific ways gamer identity is influenced by social and affective factors. Moreover, like Grooten and Kowert (2015), they extend research conceptualizing social identity as related not only to one-dimensional understandings of identity via overall categories or groups or specific behaviors, but potentially by the interactions of one’s various social circles (in this case, the fighting game and general gaming communities).

Conclusion

Our FGC-specific results provide a multi-faceted understanding of gamer identity through various circles of influence, in line with more modern understandings of identity among gamers generally. These factors provide a broad, basic framework for understanding identity, one involving individual- and community-level variables and their interactions, and affective and motivational responses to identity labels. Taken together, these factors call for a more nuanced and complex view of gamer identity that not only includes one’s gaming behavior but also other important human dimensions.

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Table 1. Demographic Information on FGC Members

Characteristic	N (%)
Race/Ethnicity	
White/Caucasian	187 (43.09)
Black/African (American)	21 (4.84)
Asian	31 (7.14)
Middle Eastern	3 (0.69)
Latinx/Hispanic	37 (8.53)
Multiracial/ethnic	42 (9.68)
Decline to answer	113 (26.04)
Gender Identity	
Male	308 (70.97)
Female	14 (3.23)
Trans/Non-Binary ¹	3 (0.69)
Decline to answer	109 (25.12)
Sexual Orientation	
Heterosexual	261 (60.14)
Lesbian/Gay	12 (2.76)
Bi-/Pansexual	38 (8.76)
Asexual	3 (0.69)
Sexually fluid/Queer	1 (0.23)
Decline to answer ²	119 (27.42)
Disability Status	
Yes ³	33 (7.60)
No	291 (67.05)
Decline to answer	110 (25.35)
Education status	
No schooling completed	1 (0.23)
Kindergarten/nursery school to 8th grade	1 (0.23)
Some high school, no diploma	12 (2.76)
High school graduate, diploma or equivalent	51 (11.75)
Some college credit, no degree	109 (25.12)
Trade/technical/vocational training	12 (2.76)
Associate degree	27 (6.22)
Bachelor's degree	91 (20.97)
Master's degree	17 (3.92)
Professional degree	3 (0.69)
Doctorate degree	2 (0.46)
Declined to answer	108 (24.88)
Location	
North America	293(67.51)
South America	1 (0.23)
Asia	3 (0.69)
Africa	1 (0.23)
Europe ⁴	25 (5.76)
Oceania	5 (1.15)

Declined to answer

106 (24.42)

¹Numbers on trans identity may be underrepresented; we did not specifically ask respondents if they identify as trans.

²If a respondent answered in a manner where it was not possible to determine their sexuality (e.g., “male” may be interpreted as “I am interested in males” or “I identify as male”), we placed them in the Decline to answer category.

³Of those who provided information on their disability status, the most common responses were ADD/ADHD, anxiety, depression, and Asperger’s, while the most common physical disabilities were hearing and visual impairments.

⁴We included Russia as a European country.

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