THE INTERACTION OF GAMER AND FEMINIST IDENTITIES IN WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

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In 2017, the Electronic Software Association reported that women are just under half of all video game consumers. However, video games as an industry and communities of gamers are apparently resistant to presence of women and especially feminists in these spaces. The events of #GamerGate serve as a stark reminder of the response to women and feminists in gaming spaces. I could not find any research has been undertaken to find out why women who are feminists continue to identify as gamers in the face of such hostility. I interviewed 10 self-identified women who detailed their experiences as both gamers and feminists. I also found that gamer and feminist identities impact each other in complex and surprising ways, leading to the creation of personal philosophies and social groups that support both identities concurrently.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

Video games are a successful, if complex, medium. The Entertainment Software

Association (ESA) reported that the video game industry generated $30.4 billion in

revenue during 2016 (ESA 2017). Players can earn money from game developers, third-

party sponsorships, or casual benefactors, by participating in e-sports (professional

competitive play) or by streaming (playing video games for a general audience) (Popper

2013). Some developers have recognized the impact of the medium and have used it to

advance agendas for the betterment of players. *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (Ninja

Theory 2017) is an example of this, as the game was made with the assistance of mental

health specialists to portray the experience of psychosis and to bring attention to mental

health resources (Ings 2017).

Social video games are among the most popular and successful (ESA 2017). The

most popular types of social games are the massively multiplayer online role-playing

game (MMORPG). Because the nature of these games requires players to interact in

order to accomplish tasks, it would seem that offline issues resulting from or shaping

social interaction that might appear in online social video games. For example, issues of

gender and racial representation in the video game industry have recently become the

intense focus of video game players, developers, and researchers in the wake of what is

now known as #GamerGate. #GamerGate refers to the widespread harassment of

prominent women in the video game industry due to their attempts to shift the production

of game industry narratives in a more inclusive direction (Chess and Shaw 2015; Gray,

Buyukozturk, and Hill 2017; Kondrat 2015; Mortensen 2016). Much of this backlash was

based on the rejection of feminism specifically, which has become a point of contention

and derision in many gaming circles.

Social science research on video games has focused on two broad categories: a

person's interaction with the gaming software itself (Dietz 1998; Kuznekoff and Rose

2012; Latorre 2015) and the social interactions between players (Cărătărescu-Petrică

2015; Greitemeyer and Mügge 2014; Ivory 2006; O'Connor et al. 2015). In the early days

of video games as medium, this would have sufficed, as gaming was not a broadly

connected activity. Video game players were rarely given the opportunity to interact with

people outside of their immediate social groups. Additionally, video games were at one

point generally considered to be an activity exclusively for men (Brehm 2013; Chess and

Shaw 2015; Cote 2017; Fox and Teng 2014; Salter and Blodgett 2012; Williams et al.

2009). For these reasons, a considerable amount of academic energy has been put forward

in trying to understand what links (if any) exist between video game consumption and

aggression (Fox and Potocki 2016), antisocial behavior (Greitemeyer and Mügge 2014),

and sexism (Behm-Morawitz and Mastro 2009; Dill, Brown and Collins 2008; Salter and

Blodgett 2012).

Regardless of their roles as either developers or consumer, women who are

involved with video games report extensive harassment and discrimination while playing

games (Brehm 2013; Cote 2017). It has also been observed that gender cues present in

the representations (*avatars)* of women in video game spaces result in negative or aggressive responses from players (Kuznekoff and Rose 2012), even if the gender of the player controlling the avatar is unknown to others (Eden et al. 2010, Waddell and Ivory 2015) These findings are similar to the literature regarding the treatment of females and feminine behavior in offline spaces that are perceived to be traditionally masculine or male-dominated (Cuadrado, Garcia-Ael, and Molero 2015; Eagly and Karau 2002; Heilman and Okimoto 2007; Koch, D'Mello and Sackett 2015; Thoroughgood, Sawyer, and Hunter 2013). However, it is important to note that the availability of academic literature regarding harassment discrimination against feminists at both the professional and social level, surrounding of the gaming industry, is relatively sparse.

Such treatment of women in masculine or male-dominated social spaces led to the creation of the #MeToo campaign in 2017. #MeToo is a social media-based activist campaign that sought to highlight the stories of women who had been victims of sexual harassment and assault (Zarkov and Davis 2018). While there has not been a formal #MeToo campaign aimed at video game audiences, it seems that #MeToo may have emerged from the harrowing vestiges of events like #GamerGate, which, as described earlier, was a campaign of harassment and discrimination against women generally and feminists specifically.

Academic literature on feminist gamers and how they cope with sexist video game culture is lacking. This is needed to provide context for the experiences of women who identify as both gamers and as feminists in order to study feminism and gaming further. The purpose of this proposed thesis is to explore the experiences of women who

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are feminist video game players. More specifically, I aim to map how identities both as gamers and feminists are developed and maintained, even when both identities are seemingly in conflict at a social level. To this end, I intend to see why people who identify both as women and feminists continue to be part of a community that is apparently resistant to both identities. The study is also interested in the ways women and feminists maintain social circles within the contexts of both gaming and feminism. Additionally, the study aims to see how women and feminists view the gaming community overall, as well as what they would like to see from the video game industry regarding their inclusion.

RATIONALE

A variety of disciplines has used video game play as a catalyst for understanding individual and social behavior. Psychological literature focuses on the interpersonal interactions between players and the game itself, with specific emphasis on affect (Chumbley and Griffiths 2006), identity (Gabbiadini et al. 2014), aggression and violence (Fox and Potocki 2016; Greitemeyer and Mügge 2014), or maladaptive behaviors, such as addiction (Bertran and Chamarro 2016). Anthropological research has demonstrated that in many instances, MMORPG players create communities similar to their offline social groups, and in some cases will incorporate them into their everyday life (Cărătărescu-Petrică 2015; O'Connor et al. 2015). Sociological research has analyzed the difficulties faced by women, nonwhite populations, and sexual minorities in this community whose narratives generally target cisgender White heterosexual males (Brehm 2013; Dietz 1998; Gray et al. 2017). Communication and linguistic studies have shown

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how messages in video game play mechanics, narratives, and imagery (including avatar construction) can be used to reflect real-world scenarios and issues (Banks and Bowman 2016; Latorre 2015; Salter and Blodgett 2012).

With this study, I aimed to gain insight on the creation, development, and maintenance of identities as a gamer and as a feminist. Respondents in this study were allowed to identify themselves as a gamer and as a feminist without rigorous categorization based on empirical criteria – this is because I wanted to see the organic way in which these identities came to be possessed by individuals. For that matter, I allowed respondents to self-identify as women because the study of gender identity in gaming is sorely lacking. Additionally, while there have been no formal studies on the conflict of women feminists who identify as gamers, it seems theoretically logical that it can be compared to issues of women in other male-dominated social environments.

This study contributes to the body of knowledge concerning how women and feminists navigate a social world that is seemingly hostile toward them and how they perceive video game development, consumption, and community. Although this has been studied in terms of an individual player's construction of gender in social games such as *Second Life* (Brookey and Cannon 2009) and the effect of gender in competitive gaming (Eastin 2006; Kuznekoff and Rose 2012), I contribute toward the understanding of how female feminist gamers develop identities and communicate and connect using the limited spaces available to them. Additionally, this study helps to specify how research on online communities could be conducted in a qualitative study.

In addition to contributing to an academic understanding of feminist and gamer identities, I aim to provide specific or general considerations for the improvement of the video game industry. As outlined in the coming chapters, there is a history of hostility toward women and feminism in gaming communities. This study provided suggestions for creating games or gaming spaces that are more inclusive. Additionally, I identified possible routes for game developers to explore when pushing back against discrimination, harassment, and violence aimed toward consumers of their games.

PLAN OF WORK

In Chapter 2, I review literature on gaming generally, and sexism in the industry of gaming. I will also review the available literature on the creation and maintenance of gamer and feminist identities. I also outline the tenets of social identity theory and identity theory as they are used for this study, concluding with an enumeration of the research questions. In Chapter 3, I outline my research methodology, including the data, sample, data collection, instruments, and data analysis. In Chapter 4, I report the key findings with reference to the research questions. I summarize the main findings, discuss the implications of this work, the limitations of the study, and provide recommendations for future research in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews literature that bears on feminist gamers. The first section examines general academic interest in gaming and social interaction, followed by the second section that reviews literature related to sexism in gaming specifically. The third section reviews relevant literature on the formation of both gamer and feminist identities. The fourth section provides the theoretical frameworks for this study. The chapter concludes with the research questions.

GAMING AND SOCIAL INTERACTION

Most of the research on video games focuses on active interaction with the product itself or interaction with other players. While the first traces of such research came with the study of *Second Life* (Gottschalk 2010) – a social interaction simulator rather than a game with objective tasks – the study of digital social environments necessarily bled into the studies of MMORPGs and competitive or violent games such as *Call of Duty* and *Grand Theft Auto V* due to the financial success of the individual games or game genres or in the perceived effect of the social play that is more or less required from these games (Chan 2011). Specifically, the real-world impact of digital interaction on behavior and identity has been tied to the study of gaming because of the vast array of game types available to consumers, the success of the video game industry as a whole, and controversies regarding problematic behavior in gaming spaces.

Cole and Griffiths (2007) found that most MMORPG players found the virtual environments to be highly social experiences that detached them from real-world categories and obligations. Even so, many MMORPG players construct personal identities in these games (Gabbiadini et al. 2014) and form social relationships with other players, up to and including considering them to be true friends (O'Connor et al. 2015). Hou (2012) found that MMORPG interaction and learning varies depending on the gender of the player as well as the type of game played. Regarding gendered social cues, Lee (2005) found in an experiment that participants tended to assume that the gender of a player's avatar was indicative of the gender of the player themselves. Waddell and Ivory (2015) found that attractive female avatars received more help in online games than non-attractive avatars, but female non-attractive avatars found less help than all male ones. Also, it appears that such evaluations of the self or others can appear in game settings, as demonstrated by Vermeulen, Castellar, and Van Looy (2014), who found that players who lost against a player perceived to be male ranked their own skills at low levels while they ranked their opponent at a much higher level – this did not occur with opponents perceived to be female. This suggests that offline cultural biases bleed into digital social lives.

Researchers have explored the possible association between individual behavior, affect, and video games. Chumbley and Griffiths (2006) found that positive and negative reinforcement in video games have a strong effect on the affective state of player, such as increasing aggressive affects in response to aggressive cues. Eastin (2006), in a series of experiments that saw male and female players playing a violent video game with both

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same-sex and opposite-sex avatars, found that females playing against male players demonstrated more aggressive thoughts and behaviors, while males playing against female players demonstrated less aggression. Dietz (1998) reported that a significant number of games feature contextually acceptable aggression toward female characters, such violence committed toward women as a narrative impetus for the (usually male) protagonist. Greitemeyer and Mügge (2014), in an extensive meta-analysis of available literature spanning experimental, correlational, and longitudinal studies, found that violent video games increase aggression and decrease prosocial outcomes, while prosocial video game play had the opposite effect. What this suggests, then, is that the consumption of gaming has effects in both the digital and physical realms that the players inhabit.

SEXISM AND GAMING

Sexism in video game culture is another fruitful area of research. Video games are conventionally considered to be male-dominated space (Dietz 1998; Gray et al. 2017), but the ESA (2017) reported women aged 18-35 constitute the largest percentage of video game consumers. Williams et al. (2009) reported that women tend to make up the majority of 'hardcore' MMORPG players, or those who devote the most time and energy toward their games. Despite this, Ivory (2006) found most games lack a significant female character, while those with female characters emphasize the sexual aspects of these characters by having these characters wear revealing clothing and behave submissively, among other noted trends. Even games that feature playable female protagonists will oftentimes portray the character in a highly sexualized manner (Salter

and Blodgett 2012) and may even exclude them from advertising campaigns (Kondrat 2015). Preliminary research shows that idealized portrayal of female game characters can have some negative effects on female game players. Behm-Morawitz and Mastro (2009) found that when playing *Tomb Raider: Legend,* female players were more likely to experience lower self-efficacy when the controlled character wore a revealing outfit, compared to when the female player controlled the same character wearing a more conservative outfit.

An important development in games is the prominence of chat features in modern games. Many video games, especially those that are founded on interaction between players, now rely on built-in voice or text chats where players can directly address each other. This has made the identification some player characteristics immediately apparent to other players, which has shown to lead to gendered interactions between players. For example, Kuznekoff and Rose (2012) conducted an experiment where a confederate played a game with alternating, pre-recorded male and female voices played over voice chat. They found that other players responding to a female voice were more likely to give the confederate a negative review than when they were responding to a male voice. Adding to this, most female players report experiencing overt forms of hostile and benevolent sexism over both text chat and voice chat (Brehm 2013), leading to the adoption defensive strategies that include concealing their gender or leaving gaming spaces entirely (Cote 2017). However, while the experiences of playing video games differ according to respondent sex or gender, there has been limited research regarding

the role of feminist ideologies in how players connect with each other or form communities.

#GAMERGATE AND #METOO

To provide context for my study of gamer and feminist identities, it is important to highlight two prominent events that informed the origins of this research. The first event is #GamerGate. In late 2014 and 2015, the event that would come be called #GamerGate took shape as a response to the claim that the video game industry had embedded sexism in the development of games and gaming spaces (Mortensen 2016). This response included not just arguments against such criticisms, but discrimination, harassment, and threats of violence and sexual assault towards feminist game critic Anita Sarkeesian, game developer Zoe Quinn, game developer Brianna Wu, and their supporters (Wingfield 2014).

Targeted harassment of women and feminists in the gaming community happened previously, but perhaps not to the scale and notoriety of a unified movement like #GamerGate (Chess and Shaw 2015). Although many in the #GamerGate movement argued that the primary aim of the movement was to enforce accountability for honest games journalism, many critics and academics noted that the targets of #GamerGate tended to be women in the games industry and their supporters (Chess and Shaw 2015). Researchers also noticed that, either directly or indirectly as a result of #GamerGate, women in gaming spaces (regardless of their personal identification as a feminist) became the target of threats of so called "real world" violence, wherein women players

and developers were told they would be raped or doxxed (have their personal information released to the public) (Gray et al. 2017).

The harassment, discrimination, and violence faced by women during #GamerGate resembles the experiences of women in other fields where men and masculine identities are dominant (Eagly and Karau 2002; Heilman and Okimoto 2007; Ko , Kotrba, and Roebuck 2015). As a result of such harassment, the #MeToo movement emerged on social media in 2017 (Mendes, Ringrose and Keller 2018). Although the term was developed and employed by Tarana Burke in 2006 (me too., n.d.), the #MeToo movement gained significant exposure after actress Alyssa Milano used it to rally for victims of sexual assault in the entertainment industry (Mendes et al. 2018). #MeToo quickly expanded beyond the entertainment industry and became a reference point for men and women to share their experiences as survivors of sexual assault and harassment on social media (Mendes et al. 2018).

#MeToo also expanded beyond the Internet, culminating is several mobilized #MeToo-style movements in offline spaces. For example, a student at Middlebury College directly identified the #MeToo movement in their decision to release a widely-circulated "List of Men to Avoid" on campus, many of whom were accused of various physical, psychological, and emotional abuses against Middlebury students (Bauer-Wolf 2018). The list brought intense scrutiny not just to the names on the list, but also to the college's apparent history of poor handling of prior accusations of rape and sexual assault at the institutional level.

The reason for the inclusion of #GamerGate and #MeToo in this study is provide context for the experiences of the participants of this research. Both movement have prior histories before their official naming, but since these movements and names are well-grounded in popular culture and the available academic literature, they will be used for the purposes of referencing to general trends and personal responses to such trends.

GAMER AND FEMINIST SELF-IDENTIFICATION

Since this study looks at the process of self-identification as both gamers as feminists, it is important to have an understanding of how a person can come to call themselves "gamer" and a "feminist." As discussed in detail later, an identity can be seen as an internalized response to social position (Stryker 1980 [2002]). Identities are developed and maintained through interaction with the social world, oftentimes by interaction with proximate social structures such as the family or the church (Yarrison 2016). However, identities are also influenced and altered by self-conception as a member of a group, meaning that groups can exist in both the social world and as a psychological phenomenon (Hogg 2006). For each personal or social identity held by a person, there is a respective personal relationship or social group to which that person is attached. These identities are not mutually exclusive, but nonetheless only one identity can be active at a time. The activated identity is thought to be a result of aggregate individual and social circumstances (Burke and Stets 2009; Hogg 2006), such as group visibility or gender socialization (Carter 2014).

The technical circumstances of identity construction are discussed later in this thesis. For now, this provides a foundational approach to the discussion of gamer identity

construction. One of the personal and social circumstances that influence identity development as a gamer is the creation of game characters. Karen Isbister (2006) writes that people become attached to the personalized characters (*avatars*) that can be created in video games. These avatars are meant to represent the player in the virtual spaces of a game. An avatar that more closely resembles a player is more likely to psychologically or emotionally attach the player to the game world and, theoretically, any communities that build up around the play of that game (Euteneur 2016). This should, in turn, lead to the creation of a gamer identity in any person who plays these games.

However, most games do not include the option for a player to design a character that resembles them. Primary protagonists in games have often been archetypically designed as cisgender, heterosexual, white, and male (Chess, Evans, and Baines 2017; Dietz 1998; Eutreneur 2016; Ivory 2006; Kondrat 2015). This in turn has primarily created a social identity of the gamer as a masculine white male, one that has become a common identifier for many people who might call themselves gamers (Mortensen 2016). While gender, race, and sexual disparities have been technically addressed as games become more sophisticated and independently developed, the advent of more inclusive gaming has also seen significant resistance as emblemized by #GamerGate, described at the beginning of this thesis.

The purpose of addressing this discussion once again here is that female gamers are more reluctant to identify themselves as gamers, especially as the prospect of actual or perceived discrimination by male gamers becomes more likely (Vermeulen, Bauwel, and Looy 2016). According to Shaw (2012), the same is apparently true of gamers who

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are also racial or sexual minorities, as gaming identities intersect with other identities. Shaw (2012) ultimately found that negative attributions to game playing were likely to be reduce the likelihood of an individual adopting a gamer identity. Understanding this in terms of the rise of gatekeeping of who is and is not a "true gamer" that underlies the events of #GamerGate (Chess and Shaw 2015; Gray et al. 2017) indicates that anyone who does not fall into all of the four identifiers of the prototypical gamer identity (cisgender, heterosexual, white, and male) would be compositely stigmatized in the gaming community and thus become increasingly unlikely to identify themselves as a gamer as each identifier remains unchecked.

Of concurrent interest to this study is the development of feminist identities and subsequent self-identification as a feminist. Unlike the gamer identity, there exists a popular model that traces the eventual self-identification as a feminist. The feminist identity development model that was developed by Downing and Roush (1985) summarily explained that women move through a series of five stages before ultimately accepting this identity. This will be explained later as subset of the social identity and identity theories, but for now it is sufficient to note that women start by passively accepting traditional gender roles and, though internalization and subsequent social identification, become a feminist.

Some interesting characteristics about having a feminist identity seem to put it at odds with also having a gamer identity by default. Liss and Erchull (2010), in a study of female self-identified feminists and non-feminists, found that self-labeled feminists were more likely to acknowledge and publicly discuss sexism, unjust gender differentials, and

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the need for women to work together for change, especially as these self-labeled feminists came closer to identifying with prototypical feminists. This discussion of feminist prototypes is important because favorable attitudes toward these prototypes is not only associated with claiming a feminist label but also with a willingness to interview when confronted with everyday sexist behavior, especially if that self-identified feminist felt more likely to be personally vulnerable to the effects of that everyday sexism (Weis et al. 2018).

In another recent study of self-identified feminists, Kelly and Gauchat (2016) found that respondents with a feminist identity were likely to be associated with progressive attitudes on gender and sexuality as well as social justice policies aimed at racial social justice. They concluded that feminists in the general public were likely to support intersectionality, which is the approach that gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity can all play a role in interlocking systems of oppression and discrimination (Crenshaw 1991). This indicates that in the general public, feminism as an ideology is continuing to move toward inclusive concerns for addressing disparities based on gender, race, gender identity, and sexual orientation.

While there has been no strict formal examination as of yet, it seems somewhat clear that self-identified feminists would generally be opposed to the current sexist state of gaming. In contrast, it appears that self-identified gaming communities have made little space for the imminent concerns of feminists. Yet, there exist people who straddle the line between the two communities, as evidenced by Anita Sarkeesian, Brianna Wu, and Zoe Quinn, all of whom are both prominent feminists and video game consumers

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(Chess and Shaw 2015; Gray et al. 2017). I could find no attempt to conduct a dedicated study of the potential dissonance and resolution of these two competing identities as they exist in an individual. It is in this personal arena that this study intends to throw its hat.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory suggests that membership (or perceived membership) in a social group affects the sense of self in terms of social categorization (Tajfel and Turner 1986). Social groups are characterized as two or more individuals who share similar identities and evaluations of themselves, including definitions of who they are, what attributes they have, and how similar or different they are to people who are not a part of the group (Hogg 2006). This is consistent even if two people in the same place at the same time had never met each other before because they can share an identity defined by a larger collective.

This is because social categorization influences social identity. According to Hogg (2006), social categorizations produce *prototypes*, which are collections of perceptions, attitudes, behaviors, and other attributes that are meaningfully related and understood as being similarly shared with members of certain groups. These prototypes provide instructions for behavior and cognition that is consistent with membership in a certain group. It is through these relational prototypes that individuals come to recognize their identity as shared with others, thus creating a shared social identity with another person or a group of people. The creation of this social identity is also what distinguishes other individuals as either in-group or out-group members (Tajfel and Turner 1986).

Social categorization is psychologically salient in that quick references embedded into social structures can help to facilitate social behavior consistent with the prescriptions of social identity prototypes (Tajfel and Turner 1986). For example, certain characteristics and attributes that might be considered appropriate behavior for women might be taught to young girls by their parents. As they mature, these young girls then behave socially in a manner consistent with what they have been taught is appropriate for women. These young girls have thus expressed group belonging through identity development work performed through social interaction with others. Conversely, the families of these girls have likely to have learned behavior expectations for women through their own individual reactions with social groups and social structure.

This social psychological theory is a popular choice for understanding ideological movements because the theory suggests that members of an in-group will maximize the differences between their groups and competing outgroups (Tajfel and Turner 1986). While this theory to my knowledge has not yet been applied to the apparently competing ideologies of feminism and video game consumption, it has been successfully used to show how partisanship between competing political orientations can form (Greene 2004). Conversely, when applied to models of social support, strengthening social identities with social groups has shown to be effective at improving self-efficacy (Guan and So 2016).

While not strictly an element of social identity theory, a theoretical process of feminist self-identification can be used to explain how social identities may form and be expressed. This process, called the feminist identity development model (FIDM), was developed by Downing and Roush (1985) as a hypothesis to explain how women move

toward a fully formed feminist identity and the subsequent adoption of feminist characteristics. The model exists as a series of five stages, beginning with the passive acceptance of traditional gender roles without questioning establishing gender inequality. At some point, women become aware of inequality and consequently become disillusioned. Women then seek out other, like-minded women and become integrated with feminist social currents. According to the model, it is at the point of integration that the woman fully dons the social identity of being a feminist and begins acting in accordance with expected behaviors of feminists.

The FIDM has been used to see the relationship of self-identified feminists to scales of liberalism or conservatism, with feminists generally identifying as more liberal, more likely to confront sexism, and more likely to believe women should work together to fix injustice (Liss and Erchull 2010). This sentiment is echoed in the feminist prototypes used to gauge likelihood to both self-identify as a feminist and intervene in the case of everyday sexism (Weis et al. 2018).

Contemporary views of FIDM conceptualize it as a series of attitudinal dimensions rather than a straightforward process of identity construction (Liss and Erchull 2010). As either a linear stage format or as a collection of attitudes, the FIDM serves as a fitting if unexpected example of the process of social identity theory due to the nature of membership in a group and subsequent adjustment of the self to reflect this group membership. If we trace each aspect of FIDM to results presented in the previous paragraph, we can see an effective pattern of adopting a social identity through perceived group membership. This social identity is thus used to guide group-appropriate behavior.

There is no specific model to gauge such behavior in people who hold gaming identities, but if perceived group membership is threatened, we know that stereotyping (Tajfel and Turner 1986) and gatekeeping (Hogg 2006) become go-to activities to maintain stable social identities. Such stereotyping and gatekeeping (among other hostile acts) were frequently used by the perpetrators of #GamerGate, who actively resisted feminist and intersectional efforts to make gaming for accessible and inclusive (Gray et al. 2017). The current study attempts to expand the explanations that social identity can provide for people who hold membership to two social groups that appear to be in conflict with each other. This study proposes to observe and report on the essential make-up of social identity theory's arguments using self-defined identities as gamers and feminists, rather than by using any arbitrary measurement of how much someone knows about video games and feminism.

Identity Theory

Identity theory states that people exist with multiple identities arranged in a hierarchy, with the top identity being the one that is most relevant to the meanings they have developed for a social environment (Davis 2016). But what is an identity? As defined by Stryker (2002 [1980]), an identity is an internalized designation of a social position for each different role a person holds in a group or society. These identities can develop from the roles an individual may occupy in society (such as a teacher), from the social groups to which they belong (such as a feminist), and from the individual's own evaluation of their self as a unique person (such as a gamer) (Burke and Stets 2009, Stets and Burke 2014).

Stryker (2002 [1980]) further added that identities can develop from the social structures that social interaction takes place in. Indeed, it appears that the context for identity development plays an important role. For example, Carter (2014) showed the role that family plays in cultivating and fostering gender identities in children. Similarly, Yarrison (2016) showed how a homogenous social structure increases the prominence of one identity over another in religious groups so long as an individual shares identity characteristics with that religious group.

As mentioned previously, people hold many identities – at least one for every personal or social relationship that an individual has. Stryker (2002 [1980]) argued that these identities are arranged hierarchically, with only one identity being active at one time. The activated identity is the one that is most salient (contextually appropriate for the situation) and most prominent (contextually appropriate for the self) (Brenner, Serpe, and Stryker 2014). The conditions for an activated identity depend on the salience and prominence afforded by a social context and that contexts' relative social structures to the activated identity relative to all other identities held by an individual (Carter 2013).

Essentially, this argues that the appearance and performance of an identity is bound to the social interactions that a person has. However, Burke and Stets (2009) also described master identities that operate at high levels of salience and prominence independently of social context and of other identities. In most cases, these identities are personal ones, rather than identities bound to their roles in society or their social groups (Davis 2016). Carter (2013) described one such situation in which moral identity was

consistently salient and prominent regardless of whether respondents were alone, in a group, or in a group while pressured to agree with a majority.

Another unique kind of identity is a *diffuse* identity (Carter 2014). These identities can be present as role identities, group identities, and personal identities simultaneously due to the meaning ascribed to such an identity. One example of this would be gender – there are roles, group memberships, and personal characteristics that are attributed to individuals (either by others or reflexively) resulting from or in relation to such identities. It may not be too far of a stretch to consider diffuse and master identities to be the same thing, and this thesis may at times discuss them as if they were, but the necessary distinction lies in this: master identities have considerable salience and prominence across all social context and thus making them consistently likely for activation (Davis 2016), whereas diffuse identities can exist concurrently as multiple kinds of identities (Carter 2014).

While there is not a significant amount of research to determine the significance of the gamer identity in a hierarchy of other identities, current research indicates that willingness to identify as a gamer is more likely to happen with men than with women (Shaw 2011), especially under the auspices of a threatened identity as a woman (Vermeulen et al. 2017) or under the apparent or actual threat of discrimination, harassment, or violence (Brehm 2013). This indicates that even as gaming becomes a more diverse activity on the surface, there may still remain an intrinsic influence of gender as a master and diffuse identity that comes with the activation of gamer identity.

Feminist identities may act in a similar manner. Feminist identities are colloquially assumed to only be appropriate for women (Wolf et al. 2018; Yoder, Tobias, and Snell 2011), despite a decidedly non-exclusive approach that feminists in the general public seem to be taking (Kelly and Gauchat 2016). Because of a storied history of exclusive focus on gender disparities (Kelly and Gauchat 2016), this may be due to how closely the identity of feminist is tied to the master and diffuse identity of gender.

What remains to be seen is how apparently two identities from competing social structures, tied to the same diffuse and master identities, may affect the prominence and salience of each other, if they affect each other at all. I aim to uncover the influence of the structure of social interaction on the development and activation of identities as feminist and gamers. This study also aims to see how and if one of these identities can impact the development and activation of the other.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions will be explored in this study:

Research Question 1: What specific factors contribute to the development and activation of gamer identities in women?

Research Question 2: What specific factors contribute to the development and activation of feminist identities in women?

Research Question 3: How do the apparently conflicting identities of gamer and feminist interact in women?

CHAPTER III

DATA AND METHODS

In this chapter, the procedures of recruiting participants and collecting data will be detailed. The first section gives an overview of sampling procedures, where participants were recruited from, and participant demographics. The section describes the data, general procedures of data collection, the instruments used for data collection, and how data was analyzed.

SAMPLING

Purposive sampling was used because of the intricate and nuanced nature of the intermingling, specialized identities under study (Neuman 2011). Considering the unknown number of feminist gamers, it would be unlikely that a generalizable random sample could be drawn. Hence, participants were selected based on how well they fit into this study, and how well they fit relied solely on their self-identification as feminists and as gamers.

Participants were drawn from recruitment scripts posted on the following social media pages (see Appendix C): from Facebook, the groups "Feminist Gamers," "Feminist Warriors of Dungeons and Dragons," "Leftist Gaming Club," and "In the Margins – A Minecraft Server;" from Steam, "Feminist Gamers" and "Leftist Gaming Club;" and from Reddit, "r/FeministGamers." These groups were selected for recruitment due to their specific or general interests in both feminist and gaming topics. Recruitment scripts were not posted without approval from at least one group administrator. Recruitment also came

from physical or electronic recruitment scripts submitted to potential participants by associates of the primary researcher.

This project was approached by the Texas Woman's University (TWU) IRB (see Appendix A). In keeping with the standards set by TWU, participants were required to view, sign, and return an informed consent documents (see Appendix D). These documents were submitted to the researcher electronically. All informed consent documents detailed the procedures of data collection, maximum time commitment for participant, possible adverse effects, and resources in the event of trauma, including a national resource for mental health.

DATA COLLECTION

Data was collected on participant experiences, preferences, and perspectives as a gamer. Data was also collected on participant experiences, preferences, and perspectives as a feminist. Data was also collected regarding participant perspectives on #GamerGate, #MeToo, and the state of the gaming community.

An in-depth, semi-structured interview was held for 10 participants (see Appendix B for questionnaire). Interviews were used due to the ability to capture the rich, nuanced data needed to establish a baseline for the study of this unique population (Leavy 2017). Each interview consisted of three sets of questions, which will be described in the following paragraphs. Each interview consisted of between 45 and 120 minutes of conversation between the researcher and the participant. The average interview length was 56 minutes. During the interviews, the respondents were notified that they could leave the interview at any time, could skip any questions they did not want to answer, and

that questions could be asked at their leisure. Interviews were conducted using a voice program of the respondents' choosing. Of the 10 participants, nine consented to voice interviews using Skype, Google Hangouts, or Facebook Messenger voice services. These online interviews were recorded using a handheld recording device. The remaining one preferred a text interview using Facebook Messenger, citing concerns for privacy as the main reason for not using a voice chat.

As mentioned above, each semi-structured interview consisted of three sections of pre-selected questions. Probing questions were used as needed to gather more specific information from the participants (Leavy 2017). Additionally, respondents were informed that although the questions seemed to be geared toward video gaming, they could also answer these questions in terms of their gaming experiences overall, regardless of gaming format or medium.

For the first section of the interview, 10 pre-selected questions were asked regarding the participants' gaming experiences, habits, and preferences. Experiences were measured with questions such as, "How did you first get into playing games?" and "Can you tell me about your experiences as woman who plays games?" Habits were measured with questions such as, "How frequently do you play games?" and "Do you maintain frequent contact with other game players?" Finally, preferences were measured with questions such as, "Do you have a preferences for how you play your games?" and "What do you like most about gaming?"

For the second section of the interview, 8 pre-selected questions were asked regarding the participants' feminist experiences, habits, and preferences, in a manner

similar to the first set of questions. Experiences were measured with questions such as "What brought feminism to your attention?" and "How did you learn to identify yourself as a feminist?" Habits were measured with questions such as, "How frequently do you participate in feminist dialogue?" and "Do you maintain frequent contact with other feminists?" Finally, preferences were measured with questions such as, "What does being a feminist mean to you?" and "Would you classify yourself as any particular kind of feminist?"

The final section of the interview consisted of 12 pre-selected questions aimed at uncovering the interaction between the respondent's gamer and feminist identities. First, six questions related to the events of #GamerGate and #MeToo were asked to gauge their possible impacts of respondent gaming habits and interaction with other players. The final six questions saw the participants responding to prompts about the current general state of gaming as well as their own place as both gamers and feminists within that state.

DATA ANALYSIS

Interviews were transcribed and then analyzed using *in vivo* coding techniques with the purpose of finding concurrent thematic elements relating to gamer and feminist identity and formation (Leavy 2017). During this process, pseudonyms were assigned to participants for the purpose of protecting identities. In keeping with identity theory, transcripts were analyzed for described moments when either the "gamer" or "feminist" identity would be the most salient and prominent, as well as the possible elements that contributed to such salience and prominence. In keeping with social identity theory, transcripts were analyzed for identity formation and activation in response to the

influence of immediate or proximate social groups and how those contributed to or were detrimental to the ability to identify oneself as a feminist or as a gamer.

RESEARCHER REFLEXIVITY

This study was conducted as part of a long-term research agenda of studying gaming, technology, and marginalized populations. I am intrinsically interested in the nature of gaming and gaming communities due to my own identification as a gamer. Additionally, this study results from my own interest in feminism. The nature of this study was inspired by several social media sites I had been accepted to previously, where women and feminists to discuss games, gaming cultures, and their experiences and perspectives freely. It is important to state these matters because they played a role in my chosen method of data analysis and the selected theoretical frameworks applied to this study.

I chose the theoretical frameworks because of the apparent readiness of each theory to address the analysis multiple identities. Since the gaming community seems to generally undervalue the participation of women and feminists, social identity theory and identity theory are useful in addressing any personal or social conflict that may arise from holding membership in communities that are antagonistic towards each other on the surface. This perspective comes from the aforementioned communities, where I had previously read lengthy discussions about the experiences of feminist gamers.

It is also vital to note that while the researcher personally identifies as a gamer and as a feminist, I am a white, cisgender male, which is typically considered the archetypal gamer (Shaw 2011; Chess et al. 2017). These identifiers could play a role in

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data analysis due to different perspectives or experiences of the subject matter discussed in this research. Additionally, it may have also influenced respondent participation in the sense that many women who are feminists or gamers may be reluctant to talk to a researcher who has many matching characteristics as the typical gamer (and, thus, the typical antagonizer of both women gamers and feminist gamers).

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

This chapter will discuss the results of the study. There are four sections to this chapter. The first section gives a brief overview of respondent characteristics. The second discusses several important findings outside of video gaming and feminism. This is normally reserved for last in similar studies, but this is being included first because they are contextual factors used by respondents to explain their experiences. This section has three subsections. The first details tabletop gaming as it compares to video gaming. The second subsection discusses cosplay. The final section discusses issues of ability and disability in gaming.

The third section of this chapter discusses findings in terms of social identity theory. This section has three subsections: the first subsection discusses gamer identities using social identity theory; the second subsection discusses feminist identities using social identity theory; and the third subsection discusses how social identity theory would explain the interaction between gamer and feminist identities.

The fourth section of this chapter discusses findings in terms of identity theory. As with the other sections, there are three subsections in this section: the first discusses gamer identities and identity theory; the second discusses feminist identities and identity theory; and the final subsection discusses identity theory and the interaction between gamer and feminist identities.

CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

Before discussing findings in terms of the theories used, it is necessary to write about some important distinctions that need to be discussed in order to contextualize a lot of the findings, even if they do not relate directly to the theoretical concepts. They need to be talked about because they were referred to repeatedly by different respondents. These findings provide some thematic frameworks that can be used to distinguish the different layers of the information presented.

Tabletop Gaming

Although this study began as an exclusive study on the development of gamer identities as a product of videogame consumption, most respondents also discussed their experiences in terms of tabletop gaming. Tabletop gaming for the purposes of this study include the following types of games: board games (mentioned games: *Monopoly, Clue, Caverna, Castles of Burgundy, Zombicide*); card games (mentioned games: poker, *Magic the Gathering*); wargaming or strategy-based battle scenario games using miniature figurines (mentioned games: *Risk, Warhammer 40,000*); and pen-and-paper roleplaying games (mentioned games: *Dungeons and Dragons, Pathfinder*).

Because tabletop gaming was discussed frequently in these interviews, it is necessary to include them in this analysis. Many differences distinguish video games and tabletop games. First, the mediums themselves are different: video games are necessarily digital products, while tabletop games could be digital in format but are more commonly thought of as a physical face-to-face games. Second, tabletop games as they were discussed in these interviews are social games, whereas video games could have been

either individually or socially played. It is important to discuss this here because the social dynamic was an important common experience among respondents who discussed tabletop gaming. Three respondents discussed some of the necessary components of tabletop gaming relevant to this study:

> "Tabletop gaming has allowed me a sense of social interaction that I didn't have before and I also think that it's a very accessible way for me to stress relief. I think if it wasn't there it would have to be replaced by something else just a significant which would be very hard to find. . . I have a whole group that I meet with multiple times a week depending on the game. I have one that I meet with for wargaming, and then one that I meet with for board gaming, and then I have one that I meet with for Dungeons and Dragons." [Tabitha]
> "I tend to play a lot of tabletop games. There's ones you can play solo, but that's not very fun to me. So board games are fundamentally a multiplayer interactive thing. . . I'm kind of introverted, so I'm not a super social person, but part of me likes playing board games because I get to spend time with my friends and stuff. . . I don't like playing stuff online with random people I've never met because you don't know what they want from the game." [Chelsea]
> "Tabletop gaming, because it's a face to face activity - while I have certainly had problems in the past with people who have some kind of damage because I am a woman, those experiences are very few and far between. . . it's different from games because none of that stuff survives face-to-face personal contact." [Miranda]

While communities formed around tabletop games in a manner similar to video games, the dynamics of group interaction were different in many notable ways. Most respondents indicated that they were less likely to be recipients of gender-based discrimination or harassment, although it did still happen on occasion. Additionally, most respondents indicated that they would engage in tabletop games with close friends or family members more frequently than strangers. The unique statements about this style of gaming is presented in the following excerpts, but it is important to note that respondents

were willing to identify themselves as gamers in reference to these styles of games and thus they will be included for analysis of gamer identities.

Cosplay

Cosplay is a portmanteau of "costume" and "play," and it is an activity where individuals dress themselves as characters from books, graphic novels, television shows, movies, video games, and other media. This is different from other types of activities involving costumes because, according to the participants who discussed cosplay, it appears to be more about displaying membership in the community of fans they belong to. In many instances, people will use these costumes multiple times and are used at gaming conventions rather than for personal or traditional celebration, such as dressing up for Halloween. I am discussing cosplay here because several respondents discussed cosplay in relation to their experiences as a feminist and as a gamer. Because of cosplay's presence in many gaming communities and its relative lack of representation in academic literature, it is important to discuss these phenomena individually here and discuss them during analysis. Three respondents discuss the role of cosplay:

> "Very recently. . . the best-known Magic cosplayer, she gets a lot of crap from people because I know a lot of people look down on cosplayers. But she basically had some guy harassing her to the point where that - combined with how other people treated her in the community - she quit. She left Magic basically, and that kind of made me feel like I did the right thing by leaving the Magic community." [Chelsea]
> "I'm really big into cosplay, I do a lot of that with other people. I do conventions all the time . . . I'm very vocal when it comes to that aspect because, again, I haven't had a lot of it directed toward me. . . with the cosplay community, I have seen a lot more about sisterhood. More girls sticking up for each other and that sort of thing. . . we will even help them throw a little con [convention] on the airforce base by teaming up with one of the game stores in town." [Emma]

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"I can walk into my living room and download a game and pick up a
controller, it's something that I don't have to go out of my way to do.
Another hobby of mine is cosplaying, which is very inaccessible. You
have to have very certain skills, you have to be able to do certain things
and spend certain amounts of money." [Tabitha]

Accessibility

One of the reoccurring insights gleaned from these interviews was the role of

accessibility in both gaming and feminism. Many of the excerpts in feminism discuss

social media as an avenue for self-education on feminist topics and perspectives and a

lack of access to formal, institutional avenues of learning about feminism. Additionally,

excerpts throughout have addressed each respondents' need to have a character that is

immediately relatable to them. All of these are issues of accessibility, but what will be

discussed in the following excerpts is focused exclusively on accessibility in terms of

being able to actually play games. Many participants discussed physical, emotional, or

psychological ailments that informed the ways in which their identities as gamers are

developed. The following excerpts provide insight to this:

"I have MS [multiple sclerosis]. . . It takes me out of the stress of the real
world. If I'm in a lot of pain that day. . . I can just pick up a game and get
out of my own body for a while." [Claire]
"I don't like phone gaming. . . I have tendonitis, my phone that I have is
really large and very uncomfortable. Controllers are made to fit in the
hand, so it relaxes around the wrist more. I do a lot of sewing and that
aggravates my tendonitis, but holding the controller hurts my hand less
than playing on my phone." [Emma]
"I use it as a stress reducer a lot for my anxiety and depression. Being able
to immerse yourself and your mind in something completely made up I
think helps you face your real life problems easier sometimes." [Gretchen]

CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPANTS

From the recruitment process came 10 participants, all of whom identify as women. Although demographic questions were not asked directly, the nature of some questions led participants to reveal some primary data about themselves: nine of these respondents identified themselves as white; eight participants directly identified themselves as currently pursuing or in possession of degrees in higher education; six identified themselves as currently partnered; and one respondent indicated that they were homosexual. Participants are referred to using the pseudonyms assigned to them during the transcription process.

SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY

According to Tajfel and Turner (1986), perceived or actual belonging to a group affects how an individual categorizes themselves in terms of which social groups they belong to and what that means for them as an individual. This leads to the development of social identities in comparison to prototypes, which are the embodied perceptions, attitudes, behaviors, or other meaningfully related attributes or actions associated with the typical member of a social group. It is in relation to these prototypes that in-group and out-group distinctions are made (Hogg 2006). A member of a social group, in keeping with relationships to the prototype, will maximize differences with out-group members while minimizing differences with in-group members, which in turn may result in stereotyping or gatekeeping when a social identity is threatened (Hogg 2006).

Social Identity Theory and Gaming Identities

For the gamers interviewed here, many did identify themselves as a gamer in a community of other gamers. This was reflected not only in the choice of games they played, but in the other gamers they surrounded themselves with. Such categorization stemming from membership in a group could be seen in how important each respondent saw gaming to their lives, how frequently they game, and what gaming entails for them. From these excerpts, it is clear that all respondents have made membership in a gaming community to be a primary part of who they are as an individual and a key component in many social relationships, including marriages and positions of authority in gaming spheres:

> "I don't usually play multiplayer games unless it's Dungeons and Dragons but I am a member of many gaming groups on social media and run my own feminist Dungeons and Dragons group on Facebook as well, so I am still talking to gamers all the time." [Gretchen]
> "Learning to play Magic the Gathering was very -- I lived and breathed Magic. I like to tell people I was addicted to Magic for six years. . . That's how [my husband] and I met, so I mean once I got into Magic I was gaming all the time. . . There have been times in the past where literally I have not had a free night because I have a game every night. . . this isn't even counting the time spent reading about games, browsing for games online, all of the stuff that kind of goes with gaming." [Chelsea]
> "[Gaming is] very important. I met my husband through [it] . . . [it's] my primary hobby. [Games have] been a source of income for me. I have many friends that I've made through gaming. It is critically important to my life. . . I am a moderator on an all women's group about role playing games on Facebook and we have 30-40,000 members and it's pretty active community. . . I'm also a moderator on the Dungeons and Dragons fifth edition page and we have about a hundred and twenty thousand people." [Miranda]

Respondents also discussed their membership in gaming communities with reference to a prototypical gamer. Each respondent indicated that for others, the

prototypical gamer was male, thus making them ineligible for gaming community

membership at some point in their lives. Many indicated that where gender wasn't an

explicit reason for differential behavior, exclusion or hostility came in the form of

negative or gender-specific evaluations of gaming choices that they played – namely, that

such choices were made specifically for or by women and thus may not lay claim to

being indicative of a real gamer. This confirms a wide swathe of previous research on the

difficulty that female gamers have faced in being a part of the gaming community

(Brehm 2013, Cote 2017, Dietz 1998, Gray et al. 2017). The following excerpts

illuminate this trend:

> "Usually I will mention that I play games and some people are like, 'oh, you're not a real gamer' when I tell them about the games I play. A lot of them don't think of games like Animal Crossing, which I'm playing now, as 'real games', probably because they aren't competitive. . . I often feel like I have to prove that I actually play and enjoy video games. . . [other gamers] thought they knew what my favorite Pokémon was because - and I can never get this out of my head – 'this is every girl's favorite Pokémon'." [Claire]
> "When I use the mic on Overwatch, people will just assume I will play [the character] Mercy because that's what they think other girls play. . . also like playing the Dark Souls games, which a lot of people assume to be hardcore games and, therefore, masculine, so it weirds people out on the internet that I love those games." [Bonnie]
> "I've always had one of three experiences. One, people got super super sexist immediately because they hear a female voice over the com and I would log off immediately. The second thing that would happen would be that they felt the need to play differently with me and they would super protect me or they would over help me out . . . the third thing that would happen would be that they would assume I don't know how to play the game, so anything that I said was just completely ignored or just second-guessed and it was just a constant fight to even be of any meaning to the team because they would just go out of their way to play as if I wasn't there." [Tabitha]

Despite the apparent ubiquity of such gender-based exclusion, discrimination, or hostility, most respondents indicated that they think it does not happen to them as much as it does to other women, or that it may not happen with such severity compared to other women. This may point toward the somewhat paradoxical conclusion that although they are indeed gamers, they are neither the prototypical gamer nor the prototypical *female* gamer:

> "I don't think it happens to me as much as it does other girls though. . . I see a lot of stories about girls getting death threats and rape threats and stuff, but I just don't think I've gotten anything more than like, 'Hey, how big are your boobs?'" [Bonnie]
> "Like it didn't happen to me as much as it happened to other women, but there was always something. Some of it is kind of more like microaggression type stuff. It's one of those things that's hard to pin down." [Chelsea]
> "I have not had a lot of pushback when it came to video games but I also don't give myself much of an opportunity to get that negativity." [Emma]
> "Um, mostly it's just a lot of people are like, 'Wow, a woman who plays games?' kinda thing. I know that there was a whole thing where women would talk about people being slime to them on the internet. . . I think other women have it worse." [Gillian]

So what, then, might a prototypical female gamer look like? While respondents did not discuss what the seemingly shared characteristics of female gamers might be, a respondent called Emma recalled a time she donned a 'fake gamer girl' costume for Halloween:

> *Emma:* I did see some girls [who were gamers] but there were very few. I did see some of those girls that were just like, 'oh, I want attention from the guys who play Call of Duty' so they go over the top with it but they didn't really play. It's like you don't have to play games, it's not a big deal if you don't. I even went as a fake gamer girl for Halloween one year.
> *Interviewer:* Can you tell me what that costume looked like?
> *Emma:* So I use the short pleated mini skirt and I just rolled up a little short cut T-shirt, really nice heels. . . a very long full blonde hair wig. . . I

had a controller for Xbox but the headset for PlayStation and then I had these really hideous thick black rims frames - just the frames, no lenses - and I wore really bright red lipstick and I took pictures with the controller like I'm almost about to lick it. The idea seemed ridiculous and funny to me.

While Emma was the only respondent to discuss what a 'fake gamer girl' looks like, it appears to be based on previously established prototypical standard on what does *not* make someone a gamer and how women in the gaming community are portrayed. In this sense, it is based on the *stereotype* in social identity theory as described by Tajfel and Turner (1986). Emma's decidedly humorous costume, based on an amalgam of many other women, confirms previous findings on the gaming community's widespread perception of the inability of women to be able to play games (Kuznekoff and Rose 2012) or to at least be knowledgeable about them (Brehm 2013). Additionally, the 'fake gamer girl' was highly sexualized in accordance with the representation of women in video games (Dietz 1998, Cote 2017).

In many ways, this costume served to illustrate the maximized difference of outgroup members of the gaming community. This should not to be read as Emma's indictment of the 'fake girl gamer', but rather it should be seen as how stereotypes of gamers are used to maximize the distance needed to be crossed for out-group members to become part of the in-group (Tajfel and Turner 1986). In the case of gamers, many respondents discuss how stereotypes of women in gaming spaces were used to question the validity of their membership in the gaming community. The events of #GamerGate were indicators of women being outgroup members in gaming spaces:

"It's like, when [#GamerGate] happens you get pulled into the community, and people think things about you. And then if I bring it up with other people who play games, usually around my boyfriend or something, then I start getting interrogated about my gameplaying again." [Claire]

"[#GamerGate] didn't impact my role playing games, it doesn't impact my tabletop stuff. . . it does affect me indirectly because it affects two people. Number one, the population of women Gamers who become very recalcitrant to reach out to other gamers. Two, it affects the population of poo-flinging gibbons who take #GamerGate as a sort of carte blanche to treat women terribly." [Miranda]

"I have always preferred playing solo video games, and when I do pick up an online game I usually don't play for long. . . [#GamerGate] makes me want to interact with people online even less than I already do. It makes me scared to even try because there are so many women who have gotten rape and death threats, just doesn't seem worth it. . . I no longer shop at one of my local gaming stores anymore (mostly table top and card games) because I overheard the owner talking to another customer and was victim blaming a woman for getting a prominent rich man fired." [Gretchen]

As indicated by many responses thus far, a common adaptation to such research was to leave a gaming space or to mask gender. This echoes the findings of other research that looks at women in gaming spaces (Brehm 2013, Cote 2017, Gray et al. 2017). This study also found respondents were more likely to withdraw from the larger gaming community to join or form alternative gaming communities where their identities as women were not grounds for outgroup membership. In some cases, this happens concurrently with a switch in gaming type – for example, from online video games to in-person tabletop gaming, or from multiplayer video games to single-player games. Respondents Emma and Tabitha detail this transition:

"I started playing with a close-knit group that I had. . . that's just not allowing that. We didn't surround ourselves with people who do that or who think that way. Then again, I don't play games online with other people. I haven't gotten the, 'Oh, you're a girl' while I was playing

Dungeons and Dragons but I think that comes from me not purposely
setting myself up for it." [Emma]
 "I have a whole group that I meet with multiple times a week depending
on the game. . . [but not] with online games and video games, not at all
with those. I've just kind of found it's easier [to play with friends] because
the communities just aren't as open or supportive and I found that it's just
not worth the trouble." [Tabitha]

Social Identity Theory and Feminist Identities

As with gaming social identities, respondents indicated that they developed their

identities as feminists in relation to other people and to prototypical feminist leanings.

Respondents were more likely to indicate their feminist identities by relating to personal

experience and through interaction with feminists on social media rather than through

specific, academic feminism. Gretchen sums this finding up nicely:

> *Gretchen:* When social media first started becoming popular is when I first
> started hearing about feminism. Obviously the movement has been around
> much longer and I had learned some history of the movement in school but
> nothing to a strong degree. Civil rights of all kinds seem to be getting
> much more recognized and heard as social media and the internet in
> general have been connecting like minded people across the planet, and
> we're finding out its bad all over.

According to many respondents, active feminist social identities required constant

self-education on issues in the world. The most common forms of self-education came

through reading feminist-leaning social media, fiction and nonfiction, and television

shows. Many of these feminists indicated that they were interested in more than gender

issues between men and women specifically, but rather that race, socioeconomic status,

age, disability, sexuality, and gender identity deserve the same attention from feminism

and from feminists. For this reason, most respondents indicated directly or indirectly that

they were intersectional feminists, which supports Kelly and Gauchat's (2016) findings

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that feminists in the general public were intersectional feminists. These excerpts from

respondents detail the terms and parameters of their intersectional feminist identities:

> "I think [I am] intersectional. I've been reading a lot about race on the internet, and I've been making the effort to read the experiences of black women. . . I have a couple of websites I follow, but I also look at feminist social media, like on Tumblr and Reddit. So much of the experiences [on those sites] are so valuable but they never get out there because they don't have a publishing deal or anything like that." [Morgan]
> "[I am an] intersectional feminist; as I believe all aspects of discrimination are relevant. This side of feminism seeks to explore and acknowledge how intersecting civil rights violations in society disproportionately affect people of color, LGBTQ+, transgender people, the homeless and poor, etc. We need to bring these issues to the forefront and not hide the terrible acts of the past. Anything less is racism, not feminism [emphasis added]. . .I read feminist articles and blogs almost every day as I follow a lot of feminist pages and groups on social media." [Gretchen]
> "Actually there was a button that I keep meaning to buy and it says and I quote, 'My feminism will be intersectional or it will be bullshit' [emphasis added]. So for me, [feminism] means I have a duty to be aware of the problems other people face in the world. . . honestly, [I read] as much as I can because anything like Bitch Planet [a graphic novel series] has stuff like essays in the back. I can read an article that pops up in Facebook because I follow feminist pages. I don't usually read anything that you would think of as peer-reviewed articles or literature." [Chelsea]

The last two excerpts above have emphasized sentences about the nature of

intersectional feminism for these individuals – in this sense, an intersectional feminist

belongs to an ingroup whose prototypical behavior is one of self-education and inclusion

of issues that extend beyond the differences between men and women. Many respondents

also discussed a prototypical *outgroup* feminist, which may be used by outgroup

members to actually describe all feminists. This prototype is aggressive and may not

reflect true feminist principles. Two respondents illustrate this prototypical feminist:

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"I'm only aware of a particular few kinds of feminist and they all are like caricatures. So like the feminazi and the not actual feminist but the ones who believe that men are inferior to women. It ties into them not knowing what feminism is about or it's a really sideways view of it." [Emma]
"They think that feminists ruin everything, and they don't want to play games when I'm there because they think I'm going to go all feminist Hulk on them." [Claire]

Much like gaming communities, many respondents solidified their feminist social identity by actively surrounding themselves with other feminists. Many of these feminist groups are, interestingly enough, also gaming groups to which the respondents belong. Respondents even indicated a desire to have more feminist acquaintances. The following excerpts discuss this in more detail:

"I run a feminist gamer group online where we discuss all kinds of intersecting feminist topics. . . As we find each other we reach out and get together for events and make even bigger communities. In my feminist group we have members from all over the world who I talk to on a regular basis. And in my offline life I have now made many friends through activism and social media platforms who I would probably would have not met and got to know otherwise." [Gretchen]
"Most of my friends think the same way that I do. I've met some people on Facebook and Steam through what I share, and we like each other's stuff but I wouldn't say we talk to each other a lot. I wish we would though." [Morgan]
"My husband is very feminist. He's kind of become that way – it seems the longer we stay together, the more feminist we both become. My best friend is feminist, several of my other friends are too, friends that you don't see in a while but online that are feminist . . . I follow some [communities] but I lurk rather than participate." [Chelsea]

Through a combination of the apparent prototype of a feminist as a self-education, intersectional-leaning individual and the tendency to surround oneself with ingroup members, it appears that these feminists were likely to put their energy toward activism based on their feminist philosophies. Many of these people mentioned that they were

willing to openly discuss their feminist viewpoints and advocate on behalf of others. For

instance, many respondents indicated that they were active for #MeToo.

> "I participated in [#MeToo]. . . I now no longer shop at one of my local gaming stores anymore because I overheard the owner talking to another customer and was victim blaming a woman for getting a prominent rich man fired. . . if I hear someone talking negatively about women and others who have come forward or talk negatively about the movement as a whole." [Gretchen]
> "I went to a presentation [about #MeToo] at my school about it. I shared my own story." [Claire]
> "I may have perhaps shocked a few men when even people as mouthy and wordy as myself, I had said 'yes, this is happened to me and people that I know'. I don't think many of my guy friends had thought about that or thought about me like that." [Miranda]

Intersecting Gaming and Feminist Social Identities

As mentioned previously, many respondents indicated that they were willing to

join or create alternative communities, and in these communities, the respondents became

the de facto in-group members as women, as gamers, and as feminists. A respondent

named Miranda shared a story about her role as a moderator for a feminist gaming group

on Facebook:

> *Miranda:* I am a moderator on a. . . pretty active community for women, non-binary people and trans women gamers. There's a lot of discussion there, usually just games but we also discuss. . . problems that uniquely affect women or trans men. I'm also a moderator on the Dungeons and Dragons fifth edition page and . . . occasionally two or three times a month, someone will bring up rape on the forum. We have a strict policy that if you make a rape joke, we're going to ban you, there's no ifs, ands, or buts. Our moderators are in accord on this, but every now and then some chowderhead will inevitably start joking about it and . . . there are fifteen moderators but I'm one of only two female moderators on the group, so sometimes I'm like, 'Gentleman, take care of your own, I can't deal with this today.'
> *Interviewer:* It's really interesting to me that fifteen people came to a consensus on this. Was that pretty difficult to get across the board?

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Miranda: Nope. Absolutely not. . . It was never even a question.

Additionally, despite the high-profile nature of #GamerGate and how invasive and terrifying it seemed to be to respondents, only about half indicated that they thought that the gaming community was generally anti-feminist. As mentioned previously, respondents were likely to believe that they did not perceive themselves to be the recipient of frequent or severe harassment or discrimination when compared to other women, and all respondents indicated that they had joined social groups therein they became in-group members as women, feminists, and gamers. This may provide some explanation for the differing perspective on the apparent anti-feminism of the game-playing community at large.

> "I think it is a majority of [the gaming community] tends to be a bit anti-feminist, at least on some level, whether they realize it or not. . . I feel like developers make a more tokenistic effort." [Emma]
> "I don't think I know enough to say, but I think there's definitely a lot of resistance. I think I said earlier that my boyfriend's friends say a lot of stuff, and the people he plays games with say stuff about feminists. It's kind a joke to be a feminist to them . . . I think gamers are a lot more mature than they're presented generally, though." [Bonnie]
> "Yes, I can still walk into a video game store with my male fiancé and not get talked to, and if I have a question about a game - instead of talking to me, the person who's asking about it, they will turn to him and answer my question. . . If I have a female character who is feminine or if I have a feminine gamertag, then I might get treated differently." [Tabitha]

Respondents were more optimistic about the direction of game *development*, however. While there was still some division, respondents were likely to identify game titles or developers by names that are making efforts to be inclusive towards women and toward feminist ideologies in games. In any case, all respondents indicated that there was more work to do.

"They are starting to listen to the community and #MeToo and #GamerGate have both gone far to address these concerns and make them public knowledge. . . developers are starting to change slowly, they start with diverse gender options and better customization." [Gretchen]
 "I mentioned Fortnite earlier, and after it came out I started watching videos of it to see if I wanted to play it. I was really struck by how many women of color and how many larger women I was seeing. So I think that's a step in the right direction." [Claire]
"I'm seeing a lot of interesting inclusion of women and nonwhite people in major games, like in Overwatch. They have female scientists, female computer experts, stuff like that." [Bonnie]

A recurrent theme among all responses was a desire for better community management on the part of game developers. Many respondents indicated that a developer with an active role in making more inclusive gaming spaces was something that they wanted in the future of gaming. This indicates that although they did turn to form alternatives communities of feminist gamers, they did so out of necessity due to the blind eye that developers turn to the problematic members of their audience. Respondents indicated that intolerant gamers did not represent who they were as gamers and they would like for these issues to be addressed from the development side of gaming. The following excerpts are typical concerns echoed by participants, which also confirms Cote's (2017) report indicating that greater structural support for advocacy as a possible mechanism for changing gaming culture.

"I think [game companies] need to take more responsibility to make sure that gaming is safe and inclusive. Just issuing a press release about how you're super upset that something happened, that doesn't do anything and that's just you trying to cover your butt. Whether it be better reporting systems or harsher punishment for anyone who does stuff like that, you have to take responsibility. Especially if you run a game where there's stuff online, where there's a lot of interaction. You need to make sure people in your community are being treated the right way." [Chelsea]

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"Take a very public stance that everyone is welcome in your game, regardless of age, gender, race, sexuality or lack thereof, nationality, or belief system. Say it upfront, put it on your forms and boot out the assholes. . . have a code of conduct and stick to it." [Miranda]

IDENTITY THEORY

According to Stryker (2002 [1980]), identities are internalization of the intermingling roles that an individual may occupy in society and in social groups. The identity results by comparing these roles to an evaluation of the self, resulting in a collection of characteristics that the individual uses to define themselves as unique (Burke and Stets 2009). Identities develop from and in relation to social structures where social interaction happens (Stryker 2002 [1980]). Each personal or social relationship results in at least one internalized identity, meaning that individuals have many identities. However, only one identity can be active at one time, and the one that is active is the one that is the most appropriate for the situation (salient) and the one that is most appropriate for the self (prominent) (Brenner et al. 2014).

Identity Theory and Gaming Identities

Most respondents indicated developing their interest in gaming and, consequently, their identities as gamers began during childhood during interactions with family, similar to the way that gender identities are fostered by families (Carter 2014). In most instances, respondents discuss playing both video games and tabletop games with parents and siblings. In many cases, gaming with immediate family was identified as a common occurrence, as illustrated by these excerpts:

"My first experience with games probably was a when I was growing up. We played, my family played - especially my dad, he played Risk all the

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time. . . I had a very limited experience with gaming growing up, but once I had video games -- a lot of them were multiplayer games. . . We played a lot of like multiplayer games." [Chelsea]

"I got involved in gaming a long time ago when I was 11. I asked my parents for this cool book I found at a store and it was for Dungeons and Dragons. . . so I, like many older sisters are want to do, I bullied my little brother and his little friends into playing with me. . . I still play D&D with him every time I get a chance." [Miranda]

"Uh, when I was about 5 or 6 or something my brother and I got a [Sega] Genesis for Christmas. He was really excited but I had no idea what to do with it. From there I would play with other people but mostly I played with my brother. . . Sometimes I'll play shooters with my brother but it's not really my thing." [Claire]

It can be presumed that in most cases, playing a game with family might activate a gamer identity, making it the most prominent and salient at the time. However, interactions with non-family members, such as peers, friends, or strangers, may inhibit the gamer identity from being activated. Most respondents indicated that because of gender stereotypes regarding gaming, they were unwilling or unable to identify themselves as gamers. This echoes Shaw's (2011) finding that women are less likely to identify as gamers.

"As a kid, [gaming] wasn't like a really big hobby and so whenever I would go to school and talk to my friends about it, like a lot of my friends had no idea that computer gaming was a thing . . . if I were to talk to [boys] about it, they would be like 'You don't know what you're talking about', so I never really talked to them about it." [Felisha]

"I went to a very tiny school of about 50 people. Very tiny. There were some guys there playing [Dungeons and Dragons] and I was like, 'this looks really interesting.' But I wasn't allowed to play it because I was a girl, so I didn't talk about it anymore." [Emma]

In some cases, however, it was only when their apparently incompatible roles as both women and as gamers were pointed out was the gamer identity activated:

"There was a time when I was around some people and we were gaming and they were like, 'I've never met a girl gamer.' And I guess that was what did it. I started thinking of myself like that after a while." [Gillian] "Really it was when other people started identifying [me] that way and I realized that's kind of how I was spending my time and so when other people identified me as, 'Oh, that's what her interests are,' and I guess I was like, 'Yeah, that's what I am'." [Tabitha]

What these excerpts mean, when taken together, is that identity as a gamer becomes most prominent and salient for women gamers when they enter social contexts where they are not met with hostility for being a woman who plays games. Many have remarked that as they move away from video games and toward tabletop games, such inclusive social contexts become more common. This may indicate tabletop games, due to the mandatory requirement of physical presence of each players, may be conducive to increased prominence and salience of gamer identities in women than video games, despite the fact that gender-based discrimination or harassment occurs in tabletop gaming similar to video games. In any case, as mentioned during the discussion of gaming identities and social identity theory, these respondents were still bound to their identities as gamers were willing to find or form the right social content where such identities can be safely activated. Chelsea details her transition between tabletop gaming communities resulting from her experiences with sexism in the *Magic the Gathering* community:

Chelsea: Ever since I stopped playing Magic and started just playing other tabletop games besides Magic, I have never felt anything but welcome. For instance, we went to Gen Con . . . it's probably the biggest gaming convention in the US . . .the thing that's great is that everybody assumed I was there to play Warmachine. No one was like, "Oh, are you getting something for your husband? Are you getting something for your boyfriend?" . . . Magic everyone was like, "Oh you must be the girlfriend or the trophy girlfriend." I haven't had that experience since I quit playing Magic.

Interviewer: Why did you stop playing Magic?
Chelsea: I just kind of started becoming disillusioned with the way that some of the men in the community treated other people. . . it has gotten worse as the community has gotten larger . . . and that kind of made me feel like I did the right thing by leaving the Magic community.

Ironically, many respondents indicated that there was a concurrence between the development of their gamer identities and the development, salience, and prominence of their feminist identities. Indeed, most respondents indicated that their gaming became conduits for feminism in many ways. This may indicate that gamer identities are operating at consistently high levels of salience and prominence regardless of social context, meaning that gaming identities have potential to be *master* identities as described by Burke and Stets (2009).

"Honestly, [I identified as a feminist] through gaming, because of having to deal with like abusive chat sometimes. I've had to learn to grow thick skin in order to stick up for myself, but it's also to like help me create connections with other female gamers and we've kind of grown stronger relationships in our own community with like a safe space where we can play together with each other." [Felisha]
"Gaming definitely had a role in me becoming feminist. I'm really big into cosplay, I do a lot of that with other gamers. I do conventions all the time, so if I hear someone say 'oh you can't do that, you can't cosplay them because you're a girl' or if someone is getting put down upon just because of their gender - it's like excuse you. If you want to play this character, you need to do it and they need to shut their mouth because it doesn't affect them." [Emma]

This paints the way for an interesting dynamic between the two identities. In order to shed light the interaction of gamer and feminist identities and how one affects the prominence and salience of the other, it is important to discuss findings on feminist identities in terms of identity theory.

Identity Theory and Feminist Identities

Similarly to the development of gaming identities, feminist identities were reported to be developed through interaction with family, but the frequency for this was not as high as it was for gamers. What was reported more frequently was the role of educational institutions and experiences of personal challenge in the development of such identities. The role of educational institutions in developing feminist identities may seem contradictory to what was discussed under social identity theory, where self-education rather than academic endeavors informed social feminist identities. However, the distinction here is that it was the *social context* of educational institutions, rather than any rigorous academic endeavor related specifically to the study of feminism, that lead to the development of feminist identities.

> "I had not used the term or understood some of the larger feminist teachings until probably grad school. . . if you looked at the grad students, 60% of the students were women. Even if you take all of the courses together, even then 60% of the students were women and I'm like this department is going to look really different when I'm old and advanced enough to teach. That kind of started to get me thinking about how men and women are treated differently in science and that is a big question for me. That was something that I became more aware of, so that's kind of like my feminist awakening." [Miranda]
> "Well, like, capital F feminism came up during school, but it was never talked about positively. I was kind of against feminism at the time because of my surroundings, but you know I was always like 'it sucks to be woman.' I was introduced to like the idea of feminism during my time in college. It was brought up during a sociology class I took and I realized I actually agreed with it, but I never did further reading until I was out in the world." [Claire]
> "I have a lot of really strong female role models in my life. I think more so with my mom. When I was a kid, she'd take me with her to some of her college classes that she was going to. . . I think at that left an impression on me. She kind of instilled in me, like you know you can do anything that you put your mind to. So not being afraid to do what you want to do

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because you're a girl was a very important lesson that she taught me."
[Felisha]

A respondent named Tabitha summarized the combination of family, educational

institutions, and personal experience that led to her development of a feminist identity:

> Tabitha: Growing up, I did identify as female but I'm not overly feminine
> and I never gave two craps about whether this is the thing I'm supposed to
> do as a girl. . . I kind of had a hard time being like, 'what do you mean this
> isn't a girl thing?' . . . I really had a hard time kind of separating the idea of
> person and gender.
> Interviewer: When do you think you first identified yourself as a feminist?
> Tabitha: I don't know it was probably like, third or fourth grade. My
> family was very very big on it since we are well-versed in history, despite
> the fact that schools were not holding up that end of the bargain. My dad
> was into . . . prohibition and depression era stuff. . . I just kind of absorbed
> a lot of the early feminist stuff and from there my own curiosity kind of
> pulled me toward that. . . but the big moment for me was, I grew up in a
> Christian church in Texas. When I was about 16, the elders of the church
> came to the youth group and they were like, 'any boys who want to be
> more involved in the church can serve communion'. I want to serve
> communion, it seems really cool, it seems like a really important part of
> our religious doctrine to take communion . . . I just kept pushing and
> pushing them until they came back a couple of days later and they were
> like, 'We don't have a doctrinal reason why you can't'. So I was the first
> woman to serve communion at my church.

Despite the apparent salience and prominence of feminist identities as a result

these many intermingling factors, respondents indicated that they would no longer engage

in feminist dialogue with other people when it became apparent that they were wasting

their time or that they were under apparent threat, either physically or socially. In many

instances, as illustrated by the following statements, the social context for this tended to

be interaction with family or with other gamers:

> "Yeah, uh sometimes I just give up with people. Mostly my parents. It's
> exhausting with them." [Gillian]

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"I haven't had anyone tell me, you know, shut me down. . . I really remember what that sort of situation was, just that one gaming store [mentioned earlier]. If you're not going to treat me like a human then I'm not going to be here. So I feel like if I were to even try to engage in that sort of discourse that I would be shut down immediately, so I don't try. I'm not going to argue with stupid people." [Emma]

"I try my best to talk to anyone who brings up a feminist issue, but when people start getting aggressive or taking my opinions personally against themselves negatively even if it doesn't affect their lives in any way, such as a male person talking about reproductive rights, they are usually past the point of listening to reason. Also, some family and friends have shown they actively disrespect feminist values so I usually don't talk to them about it if I know it's just going to be too much of a mental strain." [Gretchen]

Regardless, many respondents indicate that they would instead seek out specific communities that would provide more favorable conditions for the prominence and salience of a feminist identity. In many cases, respondents find or create offline and online communities where they can freely activate their feminist identity in either personal or social relationships. This indicates that feminist identities might be present as a role identity, a social identity, and personal identity simultaneously, thus pointing the way toward identifying feminist identity as diffusive (Carter 2014). These excerpts show how feminist identities become activated in many different social contexts:

"I am part of a group within my career sect that is pushing for more gender equality in the workplace." [Tabitha]

"Yeah, I'd say so. My friends and stuff [are feminist]. My boyfriend's coming around. . . He comes from a conservative household, and he games a lot more than I do and I know those both of those groups are very much against the idea of feminism. Even if they don't understand it all the way." [Bonnie]

"Most of my friends are self-identified feminists. But also, students sometimes kind of 'come out' as feminists to me in my office. I try to make that space available to them." [Morgan]

Intersecting Gaming and Feminist Identities

According to respondents, both gaming and feminist identities developed through interaction with proximate social structures and were instrumental in the formation of spaces that are conducive to the prominence and salience of gaming and feminist identities, usually by finding or forming spaces that allow for the safe expression of both identities for women. However, according to identity theory, only one identity can be active at a time, so even though respondents created feminist gaming spaces, it is important to distinguish which identity is more active and more salient than the other.

While many respondents revealed that their gaming identities did influence their feminism, there were far more indicators that feminist identities were prominent and salient at all times. When discussing particular games, it was clear that although they did enjoy the games and gaming communities they were a part of, their feminist perspectives provided a means to relate to and consume games. For example, several respondents discussed *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt*, a 2015 role-playing game. *The Witcher III* was a very well received game, earning critical and commercial success, with most praising production values, a somewhat unlimited, and the unusually strong narrative and characters. While the *Witcher* was enjoyed by respondents who discussed it, they discussed several sticking points related to gender in video games. It should be noted that this line of thought was brought up in any game that these respondents chose to discuss, and that *the Witcher* is discussed here because it was mentioned more than any other game:

"Developers . . . have more freedom for variations and creativity from the gamers. I have seen steps in making this progress through games such as . . . *The Witcher III*, though it did have some problematic portrayal of women as well as some good representation." [Gretchen]

"For instance, *The Witcher* it is a super misogynistic game. I still liked it a lot, it's one of my favorites actually, but it was super misogynistic and there was no one in there that I really identified with . . . it was just terrible from that perspective and that game, which I love, does not represent me." [Miranda]

"There were also some parts of *The Witcher III* – like, some of women are super powerful and super important and stuff. But they're all kind of bound to the main guy, even though they are all superior to him in just about every way. Physically, politically, all of that. But they rely on him to save them and there's no need for that." [Bonnie]

The prominence and salience of the feminist identity compared to the gaming identity was even evident in their preferences in gaming as well their desires for the future of gaming. For instance, most respondents identified themselves as intersectional feminists who are concerned with issues of race, gender identity, sexual orientation, and ability. All of these concerns were present in how they discuss games and the gaming community.

"I'm a black lesbian, so there's like nothing out there that looks like me. Well, except for the characters that I create myself, but that doesn't feel the same, you know? . . . Definitely more race options, like I said." [Gillian]

"More gender options, more skin colors and representation of different cultures relating to them, more sexual orientation diversity in both character customization and in characters of the stories themselves, more body mod options so non binary and transgender people can more closely make their bodies to their desires." [Gretchen]

"It sure would be nice if you can choose your avatar at the beginning of the game, where you don't have to be the man, you could be the woman, you could be the non-binary, you could be black, you could be fat - that would be awesome that is something that I would like to see in video games. . . I like having the ability to have an avatar that looks like me, I like to be the hero in my games." [Miranda]

The prominence and salience of feminist identities compared to gaming identities could be due to two immediately noticeable factors. First, all respondents indicated that they were willing to self-educate on feminism and feminist topics, but only one indicated that they do such self-education for gaming. This type of initiative requires constant activity on the part of the individual, so feminist identities became more prominent and salient through the consumption not just of games, but also of both casual perusal and intensive study of feminist materials.

Second, and perhaps most importantly, for all but one of the respondents, gaming is only a hobby, albeit a very important in the sense that it bind them to other individuals. Even though they do find communities and opportunities to activate their gamer identities, it appears that feminist identities were more prominent because feminism addressed the respondents' immediate well-being as an individual. Because feminism is commonly associated with gender (Wolf et al. 2018, Yoder at al. 2011) and addressed general concerns, feminist identities closely interact with diffuse identities such as gender. Feminism, as it was approached by the respondents, dealt with the apparently intrinsic dangers or idiosyncrasies of being a woman who is present in masculine or male-dominated spaces. This was evident in the discussion of #GamerGate and #MeToo, where threats of violence were addressed directly in responses.

> "[#GamerGate] didn't so much impact my game playing itself because, like I said, I play single-player games so I don't interact with a community while I play, but I tend to be a bit more vocal about it in a more, 'yeah, girls play', 'yeah, girls should be welcome in the game'. . . If someone were just to say something that'd be like, something negative about [#MeToo], I would be like, 'guess who's getting another lesson today?'."
> [Emma]

"I just feel like #GamerGate was kind of - it exploded stupidly. I mean, events like that it doesn't discourage me or make me not want to play video games anymore. It just kind of makes me want to think about the community more. Looking back on it, I know like having read up on the stuff that I didn't see at the time, like I know how rooted in racism and misogyny #GamerGate was. It kind of discourages me from seeing the community be labeled as such because I know there are some really great people in that community. . . I just feel misrepresented. . . [#MeToo] never really comes up in game but sometimes if someone I am playing with says something weird or rude or something then I will most likely say something to them." [Felisha]

"I always had the fear that someone at the store would be one of those guys, and they would find out who I was and dox me. I had just started my teaching career around that time, so it was really nerve-wracking to think that it could be derailed by people like that. I'm not even sure how they would have done it, but the fear was still there." [Morgan]

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This chapter summarizes and contextualizes findings discussed throughout Chapter 4 and links them to previous research. The first section of this chapter is a general discussion of findings and how they relate to selected theories and the body of literature on this topic. The second and third sections discuss this study's methodological and theoretical implications respectively. The final section of this chapter discusses limitations of this research and suggestions for future study.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the interaction between feminist and gamer identities in women. Traditionally, video gaming has been seen a male-dominated, masculine pasttime (Dietz 1998) that is actively hostile to women and feminists (Mortensen 2016). Through gender stereotyping in the creation of game narratives (Ivory 2006; Salter and Blodgett 2012) or by excluding women and feminists from video game spaces (Gray et al. 2017; Kondrat 2015), women gamers have struggled to enjoy games without constant harassment or discrimination (Brehm 2013; Cote 2017) or, in the cases of professionals in the gaming industry, threats of violence and assault (Chess and Shaw 2015).

Despite this, women constitute roughly half of all video game players (ESA 2017). For this reason, the first research question in this study asked about the specific factors that contribute to the development and activation of gamer identities in women.

The study found that women were introduced to gaming at young ages by family members, similar to the way young men and boys are introduced to gaming (Dietz 1998). For these women, games became a focal point of personal and social relationships. Many respondents indicated starting and maintaining platonic and romantic relationships through gaming. For some, gaming became an opportunity for income or for professional development.

Common reported instances of gender-based differential treatment include: verbal harassment using gendered slurs and stereotypes; exclusion from gaming spaces; criticism of or doubt toward the respondents' knowledge of gaming; labeling of gaming choices as not indicative of being a "real gamer;" altered behavior such as over - helping respondents after learning that they are a woman; and threats of assault including rape. Although all respondent did report that they experienced discrimination, harassment, and even threats of violence, they reported that, instead of actively leaving game spaces, they instead found or formed communities that were supportive of women gamers. Respondents became active members of this community and desire such inclusivity to the general gaming population and from game developers. Interestingly, most respondents indicated that they do not believe that they receive such gender-based differential treatment as the same frequency or intensity as other women.

In many cases, women who game also played games other than video games, and reported that they were less likely to experience gender-based differential treatment in tabletop game spaces. These tabletop games tended to be social games that, by default, require in-person play with other people. While resistance to women was present in these

spaces as well, it was reported to not be more infrequent compared to their experiences play video games with others. Notably, most tabletop gamers were willing to play tabletop games with others, but most respondents indicated that they preferred to play single-player video games.

The trend appears to be that women gamers are more likely to adapt to gender-based differential treatment by altering their own participation in the community rather than to leave the gaming community entirely. Many respondents indicated that they were unwilling to identify themselves as gamers, which echoes previous research of the identity (Shaw 2011) and behavior of gamers who are women (Brehm 2013; Cote 2017).

The second research question of this study sought to understand how feminist identities form and are activated in women. The development of feminist identities in these respondents followed a similar trajectory. Respondents indicate being introduced to feminism through proximate social structures such as family, friend groups, and educational institutions, albeit usually at much later ages than was reported for gaming. Many respondents reflected on their own differential treatment as women and in the differential treatment of other women when detailing their own feminist identity formation, which reflects Downing and Roush's (1985) FIDM model.

All respondents indicated that they were not academically-trained feminists, but rather they were self-professed feminists. Most respondents directly identified leanings towards the intersectional feminist perspective, where issues of race, sexual orientation, gender identity, and other elements of differential treatment should be addressed by feminism. Respondents indicated that they self-educate using feminist fiction and

nonfiction media, social media feeds and personalities, and through discussion with others, namely feminists in their immediate social circles.

Interestingly, almost all respondents indicated that their identities as gamers were influential in forming, maintaining, and activating feminist identities. A combination of high-profile news events like #GamerGate and #MeToo, personal experiences with the gaming community and consumption of gaming products lead to an activated feminist identity. Respondents cited poor treatment of nonwhite, nonmen, nonheterosexual, and noncisgendered individuals by the greater gaming community and a lack of good representation of these individuals in video games. It is important to note that this criticism was directed almost exclusively toward video games because respondents indicated that the social nature of tabletop games, combined in the agency that comes in playing these games, might make them more conducive to inclusive, intersectionally feminist gaming.

The third research question of this study asked how the identities of gamer and feminist in women may interact considering the gaming community's apparent hostility toward women generally and feminists specifically. Overall, this study found that while gaming may have informed how the respondents came to call themselves a feminist, it is their feminist identities that become the most prominent and the most salient when discussing the issues of gaming, women, and feminism.

It is important to note that these feminist identities did not appear in opposition to gaming in a general sense. On the contrary, and perhaps influence by their experiences as gamers, respondents instead were likely to use their feminist perspectives to illustrate

what a better, more inclusive gaming community might look like. As mentioned above, most participants identified themselves as intersectional feminists, and such intersectionality was apparent in the common call for increased representation of and consideration for racial/ethnic groups, sexual minorities, transgender people, and people of all body types, among others, in gaming products *and* on the development side of gaming.

One of the most frequent desired changes in gaming according to the respondents is an increasingly active role on the part of game developers in the management of gaming communities. This may be related view of about half of respondents that, generally speaking, the gaming community is not explicitly anti-feminist, despite the common portrayal of gamers and the gaming community as such. Although this was a very divided topic among respondents as far as gamers themselves are concerned, more often than not respondents expressed the sentiment that game developers were becoming more compatible with feminism as time passes by, either through actual commitment to inclusive ideals or due to changing game markets.

In conclusion, gaming and feminism are not mutually incompatible for these respondents. There is a deep interplay between these identities in the individual that leads to a complex dynamic that affects everyday behavior, the presentation of the self, memberships in social groups, and the development of personal or social relationships.

IMPLICATIONS

Methodological Implications

This study was a series of in-depth interviews with women who identify as gamers and as feminists. A study that looks at these two identities in women has not yet been done, so there are some difficulties that need to be addressed for future researchers. First, only 10 out of the goal of 20 women were able to be interviewed for a myriad of reasons. One of which is most likely due to the emphasis on online convenience and snowball recruitment used for this study, especially since there was a particular reliance on social media sites. Prominent or well-known feminist gamers were not contacted for inclusion in this study, and their experiences might differ entirely from the sample in this research. Additionally, because of both the small sample size and the purposive sampling techniques, it is advised against making any generalized statements about a larger population.

It needs to be noted that the researcher identifies as a gamer and a feminist. Additionally, it needs to be noted that the researcher is a cisgender white male. These need to be noted because this is a study of a group that has been marginalized. The researcher shared some characteristics with both the marginalized group while also sharing characteristics with the group that has marginalized respondents. Although the researcher did seek permission and endorsement from all social media group moderators before recruiting participants, it is important to mention researcher characteristics because it may have played a role in willingness to participant in this research, how answers may have been formed, and how data may have been analyzed. A researcher who is female,

nonwhite, and/or transgender may have different rates of participation and different insights from this population.

Further implications of the survey used will be discussed as limitations later, but for now, interview structure must be addressed. Interviews were semi-structured, with probing questions used contextually according to the parameters of each unique interview. While every participants did receive mostly the same questions, each participants also received individualized questions that may affect reliability of the data. Additionally, each interview was conducted online using video and text messaging services such as Facebook Messenger and Skype. Some interviews suffered technical difficulties, such as dropped calls, stuttering, and lag. For these reasons, some participants provided multiple answers to the same question. This may have instilled fatigue in the respondent and thus affected the veracity of some answers.

Theoretical Implications

This study sought to use social identity theory and identity theory to explain the interaction between feminism and gaming and how that affects an individual in both groups. It is important to note that this study uses elements of each theory, rather than a complete version of either theory. For this reason, the theoretical implications will be discussed in terms of what was found by this study.

This study advances social identity theory in a number of ways. First, it provides detailed information of a specific impetus that might lead to changes in social groups that supports social identities. Each respondent indicated finding or forming unique communities to which they can become ingroup members. These communities were

formed in response to apparent out-group membership to a community from which they were pushed away. In the case of women who are feminist gamers, in response to personal experiences and social categorization resulting from both #MeToo and #GamerGate, participants indicated that they actively sought out likeminded individuals who would concurrently support their gamer identities, their feminist identities, and their identities as women.

Additionally, this study found support for the hypothesis of prototypes used to indicate appropriate in-group and out-group behaviors. In this case, women who are gamers were consistently reminded that they were *not* a prototypical woman gamer and were treated as such, leading them to the formation of groups to which they could establish a *new* prototype – one of an inclusive gamer. In terms of feminism, many respondents indicated that the prototypical feminist should be intersectional, and that feminists who were not intersectional were, perhaps, not feminist enough (if at all).

In this sense, social groups of both gamers who are accepting of feminism and feminists who are intersection intertwined to create immediate social structures that not only confirmed social identities and their in-group membership in these social groups, but also contributed to the activation of gamer and feminist identities. This study thus shows that identities may play a role in the creation of social contexts that promote salience and prominence of a seemingly desired social identity. For instance, all respondents indicated that they wanted more inclusive gaming communities as it appeared that #GamerGate – in spite of its dubious popularity in the discussion of a 'typical' gamer – did not represent themselves as gamers nor the gaming communities to which they belong.

Consequently, this study also further identity theory by detailing the ways that a social contexts and the identities themselves seem to play a role in the hierarchical organization of identity, as well as the specific environmental effects that lead to an activated identity's prominence and salience. In keeping with Shaw's (2011) study of identifying as a gamer, many respondents in this study were unwilling to identify themselves as female in response to perceived or actual threat of gender-based harassment, assault, or other differential treatment. Conversely, the perceived or actual implications of going unheard or wasting a time made it unlikely that a feminist identity would be activated, or at least not active enough to warrant engaging in behavior that might be considered typical of a feminist.

Ultimately, in keeping with identity theory, the most prominent and salient identity is the one that is active at the time (Brenner et al. 2014). In this study, the feminist identity was more salient and more prominent as evidenced by how frequently the discussion of games was discussed in terms of the respondents' feminist perspective. This appeared to be true despite the effect of question ordering, as respondents usually discussed their experiences as a gamer as influential to the development of their feminist identities. Feminist identities were also present in other hobbies (such as cosplay) and in terms of occupational advancement as well. It was also indicated that feminist gamers are likely to form or find new social structures on the basis of their *feminism* rather than their gaming, as they actively leave communities that are not only hostile them as women but also resistant to feminist principles. This indicates that feminist may be either a diffusive

identity (Carter 2014) or a master identity (Burke and Stets 2009) due to its ubiquity in these responses.

However, it is important to note once again that many respondents indicated that gaming informed their feminist viewpoints, and may have even led to the salience and prominence of a feminist identity. This indicates that gaming operates at high prominence and salience at all times, concurrent with other identities, thus making the gamer identity in this study a potential master identity (Burke and Stets 2009). Of course, it is important to note that both of these identities were discussed in terms of gender identities, meaning all three had complex, interlocking effects in the ways respondents experience their social contexts. For these reasons, the activation of feminist identities due to being the most salient or prominent must be considered only be salient and prominent in an essentialist and arbitrary sense. All three identities certainly impacted each other during internalization and in identity-based behavior.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The primary limitation of this study is its small sample size of 10. In order for any findings from this study to be generalized to a larger feminist gamer population, studies with a larger sample size must be conducted. Additionally, this study uses convenience sampling, which compounds issues of generalizability from this study because all participants were recruited from and interviewed using online procedures. A sample of individuals, perhaps randomly selected, who are interviewed in face-to-face settings may provide additional insights.

This study limited its sample to respondents who identified themselves as women. This means that feminist gamers who are men were not sampled. Because of the potentially intermingling effects of gender on feminist identities and on gamer identities (and any relationship between the two), a study of self-identified male feminist gamers must be conducted in order to add more validity to the results of this study.

An additional limitation of this study is that it strictly looked at the experiences of participants who identified themselves summarily as women, as feminists, and as gamers. Although most respondents did voluntarily reveal some information about their age, ability, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, or transgender identity, it was not asked from participants. While any (or all) of these characteristics did potentially impact the experiences of the individuals interviewed for this study, any findings in this study related to these characteristics should only be considered incidental until further studies are conducted focusing on these aspects.

A final consideration is the different realms of gaming discussed in this study. Many respondents made necessary distinctions between the video game community and other related but distinctly separate communities. Tabletop gaming provided some interesting contrasts in terms of identity and social group membership compared to video gaming. A sizable minority of individuals discussed cosplay as related to gaming as a community and their identities as gamers and as feminists. Both communities should be thoroughly explored for any findings similar to this study.

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    9.

APPENDIX A

IRB APPROVAL LETTER

DATE   January 26, 2018

: TO: Mr. Michael Winters
            Sociology & Social
            Work

FROM
:   Institutional Review Board (IRB) - Denton

Re: Exemption for Feminist Gamer Experiences (Protocol #: 19930)

The above referenced study has been reviewed by the TWU IRB (operating under FWA00000178) and was determined to be exempt from further review.

If applicable, agency approval letters must be submitted to the IRB upon receipt PRIOR to any data collection at that agency. Because a signed consent form is not required for exempt studies, the filing of signatures of participants with the TWU IRB is not necessary.

Although your protocol has been exempted from further IRB review and your protocol file has been closed, any modifications to this study must be submitted for review to the IRB using the Modification Request Form. Additionally, the IRB must be notified immediately of any adverse events or unanticipated problems. All forms are located on the IRB website. If you have any questions, please contact the TWU IRB.

cc.   Dr. Celia Lo, Sociology & Social Work
       Dr. Jessica Smartt Gullion, Sociology & Social
       Work Graduate School

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Part I: Gaming Experiences

The goal of the first set of questions is to gauge respondent experiences regarding their interactions with and preferences in the medium of video games.

1. How did you first get into playing video games?
2. Generally speaking, which types of video games do you prefer?
    a. Genre: Define this however you like
    b. Specific: A couple of different games
3. Do you have a preference on which systems you use to play your games? For example, phone, console, or PC gaming?
    a. Why do you have this preference?
4. What do you like most about gaming?
5. How did you come to identify yourself as a gamer?
6. How important are video games in your life?
7. How frequently do you play video games?
8. Can you tell me about your experiences as a woman who plays video games?
9. Do you maintain frequent contact with other video game players, such as playing multiplayer games or using social media?
    a. *Yes:* To what degree?
    b. *No:* Continue
10. Have you been the target of gender discrimination or prejudice while playing a game?
    a. *Yes:* How so?
    b. *No:* Continue

Part II: Feminist Experiences

The goal of the second set of questions is to gauge respondent experiences regarding their identity as feminists.

1. What brought feminism to your attention?
2. How did you learn to identify yourself as a feminist?
3. Why did you decide to adopt this identity?
4. What does being a feminist mean to you?
5. Would you classify yourself as any particular kind of feminist?
6. How frequently do you read feminist literature?
7. How frequently do you participate in feminist dialogue?
a. What stops you from engaging in feminist dialogue?
8. Outside of [the community participant is recruited from], do you maintain regular contact with other feminists?

a. *Yes:* How do you come to meet them? Do you prefer one kind of social environment over another?

b. *No:* Continue to next question

Part III: Feminist/Gamer Experiences

The goal of this third set of questions is to gauge respondent experience regarding the intersections of their identities as gamers and as feminists.

1. Are you familiar with #GamerGate?

   a. *No:* Briefly, #GamerGate was an incident in the summer of 2014 where prominent feminist video game critic Anita Sarkeesian was harassed by members of the gaming community on the grounds that she was unprofessional or uninformed. Similar incidences occurred that targeted female video game developers Brianna Wu and Zoe Quinn. All of these women were threatened with violence and had their personal information released to the public.

   b. *Yes:* Continue to next questions

2. When events like #GamerGate occur, does this impact your video game playing?

   a. *Yes:* How so?

   b. *No:* Continue to next question

3. When events like #GamerGate occur, does this impact your interaction with other gamers?

   a. *Yes:* How so?

   b. *No:* Continue to next question

4. Are you familiar with #MeToo?

   a. *No:* Briefly, #MeToo was a social media campaign in 2017 that brought focus to the stories of women who were victims of sexual harassment and assault. #MeToo was popularized around the time that Harvey Weinstein, a powerful Hollywood executive, was facing sexual harassment allegation from many women. This event is notable because many women (and some men) who were previously unwilling to discuss their experiences were able to discuss what happened to them.

   b. *Yes:* Please continue to the next questions.

5. Do you feel this #MeToo may have resulted from the events of #GamerGate?

   a. *Yes:* Why do you feel this way?

   b. *No:* Why do you feel this way?

6. When events like #MeToo happen, does this impact your video game playing?

a. *Yes:* How so?
b. *No:* Continue to next question

7. When events like #MeToo happen, does this impact your interaction with other gamers?
    a. *Yes:* How so?
    b. *No:* Continue to next question

8. As a whole, do you feel like the video game community is generally antifeminist?
    a. *Yes:* Why do you feel this way?
    b. *No:* Why do you feel this way?

9. Do you feel like video game developers are making an effort to create video games or gaming spaces that align with feminist values?
    a. *Yes:* Can you provide an example?
    b. *No:* Can you provide an example?

10. Are there any video games, modern or classic, that you see as being feminist?
    a. *Yes:* Please identify one and explain your reasoning.

11. Do you feel like you are well-represented in video games?

12. What are some things that you would like to see as a common feature of video games in the future?

APPENDIX C

RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

Hi everyone!

My name is Michael Winters and I am researcher at Texas Woman's University. I am currently working on a project that looks at women's experiences as both gamers and feminists. For this study, I would like to interview women who are 18 years of age and older who self-identify as both gamers and feminists. I won't be testing your knowledge on video games or feminist discourse, but rather I am interested in your unique perspectives on feminism and gaming. Each interview should take approximately 2 hours. Interviews can either be in video or text format, whichever is most comfortable for you. Interviews will take place using a service of your choosing – Facebook chat, Skype, Discord, FaceTime, Steam, or any other service you are familiar with. Your personal information will not be used in this study and all participants will be given a code name for inclusion in this study. Participation is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time. If you are interested in participating in this study or if you have any specific questions regarding the nature of this research, please contact me directly at mwinters3@twu.edu. There is a potential risk of loss of confidentiality in all email, downloading, electronic meetings, and internet transactions.

APPENDIX D

INFORMED CONSENT

TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title: Feminist Gamer Experiences

Investigator: Michael Winters ....mwinters3@twu.edu 940/898-2052
Advisor: James Williams, PhD....................................jwilliams2@twu.edu 940/898-2052

Explanation and Purpose of the Research
You are being asked to take part in a research study for Mr. Michael Winters at Texas Woman's
University. The purpose of this study is to explore the experience of feminist video game players.
To this end, the present study intend to see why feminists continue to be part of a community is
apparently resistant to their presence. The study is also interested in the ways feminist gamer
communities form and recruit members. Additionally, the study aims to see how feminists view
their overall portrayal in the contents of the medium itself, as well as what they would like to see
from the video game industry regarding their inclusion

Description of Procedures
As a participant in this study you will be asked to spend approximately two hours of your time in
a face-to-face interview with the researcher. The researcher will ask you questions about your
experiences as both a gamer and a feminist. You and the researcher will conduct the interview
using either a video messaging service of your choice. The audio of the interview will be
recorded and then written down so that the researcher can be accurate in studying what you have
said. The researcher will assign a code name to you for the purposes of this study.

Potential Risks
The researcher will ask you questions about your experiences as both a feminist and a gamer. A
possible risk in this study is discomfort with these questions you are asked or fatigue resulting
from the time spent in the interview. If you become tired or upset you may take breaks as needed.
You may also stop answering questions at any time and end the interview. If you feel you need to
talk to a professional about your discomfort, the researcher has provided you with a list of
resources.

Another risk in this study is loss of confidentiality. Confidentiality will be protected to the extent
that is allowed by law. The interviewer will conduct interviews in a private, locked office with
no other person in the room. The investigators urge you to make similar accommodations. A
code name, not your real name, will be used during the interview. No one but the researcher will
know your real name. The recorded audio and the written interview will be stored on a USB drive
in a locked cabinet in the researcher's office. Only the researcher and his advisor will hear the
tapes or read the written interview. The audio and the written interview will be shredded within
10 years after the study is finished. The results of the study will be reported in scientific

_____
Initials

magazines or journals but your name or any other identifying information will not be included.
There is a potential risk of loss of confidentiality in all email, downloading, electronic meetings
and internet transactions. Additionally, due to the nature of this study, anonymity cannot be
guaranteed.

The researchers will try to prevent any problem that could happen because of this research. You
should let the researchers know at once if there is a problem and they will help you. However,

TWU does not provide medical services or financial assistance for injuries that might happen because you are taking part in this research.

Participation and Benefits

Your involvement in this study is completely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time. If you would like to know the results of this study we will mail them to you.

Questions Regarding the Study

You will be given a copy of this signed and dated consent form to keep. If you have any questions about the research study you should ask the researchers; their phone numbers are at the top of this form. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this research or the way this study has been conducted, you may contact the Texas Woman's University Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at 940-898-3378 or via e-mail at IRB@twu.edu.

_____   _____

Signature of Participant   Date

*If you would like to know the results of this study tell us where you want them to be sent:

Email: _____

Resources
If the questions in this interview cause you psychological or emotional distress, please use the following resources:

The Crisis Call Center is available 24-hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. They have specialists who can help with sexual assault-related crises as well.
Call: (775) 784-8090
Text "ANSWER" to 839863

MentalHelp has a list of local crisis hotlines that are available 24 hours a day.
https://www.mentalhelp.net/articles/mental-health-hotline/

The American Psychological Association has a psychologist locator that can help you find a local mental health specialist.
http://locator.apa.org/