Thoughts on Interaction, Gaming, and Changes in the Online World Due to COVID

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this thesis is to understand the differences between online and in-person social interactions with a focus on gaming and gaming-related online platforms. In addition, I explore how these online interactions have changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While there are many studies on the often negatively portrayed effects of online gaming, there is a general lack of studies which explore how social interactions around gaming occur. Moreover, there is a relative lack of research which explores the differences between in-person and online social interaction more generally. To fill these gaps and learn more about these areas, I conducted in-depth interviews with five young adults that participated in popular online gaming platforms and had varying degrees of presence on other social media sites.

From these interviews multiple themes emerged. First, participants believed that in-person interactions were more intimate and open than online interactions. This was due to a lack of social cues when using text and voice chats as well as participants wanting to keep their information off of the internet. Second, participants felt that online gaming-related sites and platforms allowed them to use a gaming persona which provided them with an opportunity to interact with others, but present themselves in a selective and controlled way. Third, participants noted that online methods of social interaction were preferred when it was not possible to meet

with people in person, such as when they desired to interact with others over great distances or, more recently, due to the pandemic. The final theme that emerged from the interviews was related to how the COVID pandemic had changed interactions that happen online. Participants spoke of how online interactions became more normalized and increased in volume. Lockdowns caused boredom and a lack of in-person interaction for many people. This led to the growth of many video conferencing apps. and also many more people playing online games and joining interactive communities around online games. Participants preferred this normalization and welcomed the changes to the online world brought on by the pandemic.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic truly shifted how the world works and how people interact and go about their lives. The introduction of masks into everyday life has become a new normal. Another change that occurred was how people socialized. While people were isolated from one another, in-person interactions became an impossibility for anyone not living under the same roof. Because of this, people turned more to online interactions for work, socializing, or for other aspects of daily life that were not possible during lockdown (Koeze et al, 2020). Apps such as Zoom, Discord, and videogames became the stand-ins for everyday interactions, but these interactions could operate very differently than if they happened face to face. For example, the person who usually leads conversations might have to be quiet to not wake his family and not be able to get a word in during a conversation. The quieter person in a group may wind up talking more with no face-to-face social pressure.

The massive explosion of digital media has further changed how interactions can work when online. The massive popularity of Youtube, Twitch, and Tik Tok have shown how new microcelebrities can grow and foster their online communities. These celebrities use other apps like Discord and usually have some level of interaction with those that follow them. These "parasocial" relationships have changed the way people interact with one another. Interacting with the celebrities you follow has a very new and different way of working. For example, money can be used to get attention and the fame an influencer has can be used to make money for some with fewer scruples. Cryptocurrency scams, legitimate products, and their line of merchandise can be sold by these online celebrities and their fame and the fan's feeling of being close to the celebrity will often compel people to spend their money to buy those products (Gottsegen, 2022).

The video game industry has also boomed recently as people have turned online for fun. Everything from mobile games to the pc industry has undergone massive changes since the pandemic began (Koeze et al, 2020). Silicon has been in massive shortage and apps like Discord have become dominant as things related to video games have massively exploded in popularity. Video games have become a large part of how people end up talking to each other. Entire social groups are created around video games and the people who participate may or may not have even met each other in person. During the pandemic, statistics showed that "The video-game industry could be one of the greatest beneficiaries of the pandemic, growing 23% in 2020 from the year prior" (Williams, 2022). When people buy video games they usually play those video games. A large portion of those games is likely multiplayer, which will lead to an increase in online interactions. If one likes a game they may watch others play it on Twitch, or join a Discord server of people who enjoy the game. This massive increase in people buying and playing video games also means that those same people will likely have more online social interactions.

For a long time, the media has shaped stigmas surrounding video games and online entertainment. School shootings such as Columbine and other tragedies have been blamed on media and video games (Campbell, 2018). More recently, the coverage of video games and online media has become more positive, for example, showing the positive effects of video gaming due to the pandemic (Lufkin, 2020). The positive effects of gaming have also been studied by Vitelli (2014) who found that playing video games increased socialization and improved mood. Especially with the creation of gaming and online-focused news outlets such as Polygon and Wired, the idea of gaming and the culture it fosters are being written about in a more positive light.

With the massive boom of electronic entertainment and online socialization, it is important to understand how being online can change or shape interactions. Especially in the wake of the pandemic and lockdowns, it is important to learn about this in case another pandemic ever happens. The purpose of this study is to understand the differences between online and in-person interactions and how they have been shaped and altered by the pandemic. This study will largely focus on interactions on social media related to gaming. I will also explore related online interactions that occur in the workplace, through platforms such as Zoom. There has been some research done on this topic but much of it was done before the pandemic which changed much of how people interact with technology. This study will bridge some of the gaps in the research that has been done on online socialization, namely to understand how online communications, especially through gaming have changed through the course of the pandemic and how online interactions differ from similar in-person interactions. In the process, I aim to learn about new types of relationships that have formed due to online interactions that came about due to the pandemic.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Referenced Apps and Software

Many different platforms are used for online interactions and communication. Many of these platforms are used for different purposes and have different sets of features. Some such as Discord and Twitch are more focused on gaming and gaming-related content, whereas sites such as Instagram and Facebook are more focused on networking and photo sharing. These different platforms also foster different communities that can create very different cultures. These sites can have their own lingo and slang such as the term Pog or Pogchamp, a term coined on Twitch which "is used to express excitement, amazement, or disbelief, usually when a streamer pulls off an impressive play, a big clutch, or a talented skill" (Highton, 2022). The different sites and apps show different aspects of one's identity and all have differing levels of anonymity. The following are examples of more popular online gaming and social media applications.

Discord

Discord is a staple app in the gaming community and is used by millions of people. It is a large focus of this study as much of the online communication through gaming is done through Discord.

> "Discord first launched in 2015 as a means for people to easily communicate while playing PC games together. The service allows users to create servers, which can consist of a variety of text and voice channels. A typical server might have dedicated chat rooms for specific topics (such as "general chat" and "music discussion") as well as voice channels for specific games or activities. The service's high-quality, low-latency voice

chat makes it a popular tool for Twitch streamers and podcasters, and it's also grown to support large video chats to keep up with the Zoom generation." (Andronico, 2021)

Accounts on Discord are usually by username and not a person's actual name. Often their usernames are the same as on other gaming platforms such as Steam. One can link their gaming and some other social media accounts to their Discord profile, though this is usually limited to Steam and Twitch accounts (see below). Discord can be used by streamers or developers of video games to foster huge communities of thousands, or the servers may be used for smaller groups of even only 2 or 3. Discord servers are tremendously different depending on what they are being used for.

Public Servers are servers that do not require a password or an invitation to join. Many of these servers center around different celebrities, video games, or just general interests. These servers can be small but often have thousands if not tens of thousands of users. Private Servers are servers that require passwords or invitations to join. These can be made for many reasons. It may be small friend groups creating these servers to play video games together, it may be for private organizations or Esports teams.

Communication on Discord is done in two main ways, text chats and voice calls. Text chats operate similarly to texting as people in the group send text, images, or videos to the other people in that channel. Communication can also be done through voice calls. These are rooms which one enters where you can hear the voices of the other people in the call. It is much like a phone call with anywhere from two to hundreds of people. One can also start a video call using Discord. These operate much like voice calls except that a user can use their camera and show their face to the other people in the call. Private group chats and voice calls can also be done

outside of servers. One can create a group of up to ten people and start text chats and voice or video calls.

Steam

Steam, created by the Valve Corporation, is, "a digital games distribution platform which gives consumers centralized multiplayer gaming and social networking and gives developers digital rights management and seamless publishing and distribution" (Yu, 2017). Users of Steam buy games, talk to other gamers, sometimes publish games, Livestream themselves playing games, and use many of the other features available through the platform. Steam hosts multiplayer servers for video games and is the primary app used to play video games on PC, "It is estimated that in 2015, 15% of global PC gaming transactions went through Steam" (Yu, 2017) and that percentage has since grown. While there are competitor apps such as the Epic Games Store, Battle.net, and others the other platforms do not offer the same features and ease of use that Steam has. According to Steam's metrics, Steam had around 120 million monthly users in 2020. Steam users use a username and seldom their actual name, it is mostly anonymous and is not usually linked to other social media sites.

Twitch

"Founded in 2011, Twitch is a platform for live video streaming, offering nearly anything you'd want to watch, from cooking, music, Q&A sessions, and — the leading driver of traffic — video games" (Yaden, 2021). While Twitch is a much smaller platform than other social media sites it is largely popular within gaming communities. While sites such as Youtube tend to host short-form content that with some exceptions is often no longer than an hour, Twitch is based

around long-form videos. The streamer HasanAbi, “streamed for 3,030 hours in 2021” (Hegde, 2022). Streamers on Twitch often spend 3-5 hours streaming 5 days a week. This creates a very different style of content than is available on other platforms.

Another aspect of Twitch is that people watching a stream (often called chatters) can send text messages to a constantly updating chatlog that many streamers leave on their screen and sometimes respond to. The username is shown alongside the chats and every chatter can see the chat. Most people chose to remain anonymous and often use their gaming usernames. Along with sending chats, chatters can also send streamers money to have a highlighted message sent to the streamer that is more likely to be responded to. Users can also “subscribe” to a Twitch channel. The subscriptions operate in tiers, a Prime subscription is a free subscription that users can use once if they have an Amazon Prime account as Twitch is owned by Amazon, a tier-one subscription is five dollars a month, a tier two subscription costs ten dollars a month, and a tier-three subscription costs twenty-five dollars a month. All subscriptions mean that a user will not see advertisements that streamers may run on their channel to make money, different tiers will have different benefits depending on the streamer but often higher tiers will unlock different emotes, or small streamer specific emoticons, that the user can use in Twitch Chats. A subscription only gives a user benefits on the Twitch channel they used it on.

Snapchat

Snapchat is a Photo-sharing and text chat service where the photos and text are sent to disappear. Users can choose to have text chats be deleted after they are read or 24 hours after they are sent. The app shows when photos or text chats are screen-captured or saved. Snapchat has, “tapped into a deep desire among younger Internet users for ephemeral communication, for activity that doesn't have to be entered in the global logbook in the cloud” (Madrigal, 2013).

Many people use Snapchat for more intimate conversations or information they may want to keep secret as the messages disappear and outside of some exceptions cannot be viewed without the help of law enforcement. Snapchat allows for group conversations and for video and voice calls, though those features are used far less often than the photo and text chats.

Facebook

Facebook is among the oldest and most popular social networking sites. Founded in 2004 and is owned by the parent company Meta. While Facebook was an early social network it offers users many features.

> "users can create profiles, upload photos, join a preexisting group, and start new groups. The site has many components, including Timeline, a space on each user's profile page where users can post their content and friends can post messages; Status, which enables users to alert friends to their current location or situation; and News Feed, which informs users of changes to their friends' profiles and status. Users can chat with each other and send each other private messages. Users can signal their approval of content on Facebook with the Like button, a feature that also appears on many other websites. Other services that are part of Meta Platforms are Instagram, a photo- and video-sharing social network; Messenger, an instant-messaging application; and WhatsApp, a text-message and VoIP service" (Hall)

One's Facebook profile is created around the personal identity that one wants to present to those that can see their profile. Many people use Facebook to present an image of themselves that is conducive to universities they wish to attend or jobs they wish to be hired for. Facebook is built on an algorithm that presents one with stories, images, and news that are meant to interest

the user. It is more often used by older generations and is mainly associated with older people in perceptions of its usage.

Instagram

Instagram is also owned by the parent company Meta. It is mainly an image-sharing site that also provides a marketplace and short videos one can watch. Instagram is much like Facebook but has a much higher emphasis on videos as opposed to status updates and news. Instagram accounts are tied to the user and usually are under the user's actual name.

> "When you post a photo or video on Instagram, it displays on your profile. Other users who follow you see your posts in their feed. Likewise, you see posts from other users you follow" (Moreau, 2022)

Often users will present a glamorized version of their life through Instagram. These can be photos from parties, vacations, or occasions that users feel are worth posting photos. Much like Facebook, these images come with a caption that often tells others what the person who posted the photo had been doing or how they are feeling. Users will also create more private Instagram accounts, often known as a "Finsta". A Finsta "is short for *Finstagram*, or "fake Instagram," referring to an account made so that a user can post images and interact with other accounts in a more private way, usually reserving the account's followers to close friends" (*Merriam-Webster*). Finsta accounts may be used for more personal photos, jokes, or other pictures a user does not want to be seen by their entire social network.

Reddit

Reddit is “a massive collection of forums where people can share news and content or comment on other people’s posts” (Widman, 2021). The forums are broken down into “subreddits” which are forums centered around a particular topic. Some of the largest subreddits are r/gaming which is centered around gaming, r/funny which is a form of jokes and funny photos, and r/worldnews which is centered around world news and acts as a discussion forum for news. Posts on Reddit are either text, images, or video and other Redditors can comment on the text under any post. Reddit is anonymous and users post under usernames. These usernames can be ones used for gaming or just random usernames. The site is anonymous unless one actively posts information about themselves, which is not often done. Large communities on Reddit focus on games and gaming. Every popular game has a subreddit that is dedicated to the discussion of those games. Many of these subreddits also host a Discord server centered around the same topic where users can meet each other and use Discord to further discussions or meet people in that community.

Zoom

Zoom is a video conferencing that exploded in popularity due to the COVID pandemic. Zoom is “a cloud-based video communications app that allows you to set up virtual video and audio conferencing, webinars, live chats, screen-sharing, and other collaborative capabilities” (Antonelli, 2020). Zoom is used in school, work, and other social settings. It is often used when in-person interactions are not possible. It has a text chat feature but is mainly used for video conferences.

Literature Review

While there is data involving online interactions, much of it is focused on social media and its correlations with mental health (See, for example, Carras et al, 2017). A large focus of this research is placed on how different groups, mainly younger people (millennials and under) interact online (See for example, Robinson et al, 2019). The focus is similar to studies that involve gaming as much of the research is on gaming addiction and mental health focus on similar concerns. Much of this literature also focuses on social media (see Fischer et al, 2011, Arts et al, 2021, etc). While social media is not strictly always used by those who play games with others there is a massive overlap. For example, many gamers use Discord, a voice chatting service to communicate and talk to friends while playing video games. Discord also has servers that operate similarly for groups on Facebook. They may be focused on a game, around an influencer, or just made as a way for friends to communicate. These social media options are often tangential to gaming and thus the studies on social media can shed light on online interactions. There is some literature related to online interactions through gaming and those studies are extremely relevant for this research (See for example Lufkin, 2020). The difference in interactions, when moved online, has not often been studied directly. Similar topics however have a much larger wealth of studies and literature.

Related Studies

A good example of a study that can indirectly help my research is Arts et all, (2021). This journal focuses on the use of electronics in situations that are usually devoid of electronics. This is a good example of a study that does not directly focus on online socialization but that can be used to supplement my research. “Information technology is currently being utilized in a wide

variety of settings that offer insight into its importance in everyday life and communication with others. For example, technology can massively improve experiences with hiking. A GPS can prevent getting lost, Help people communicate with others when danger is present, offer apps that can identify flora and fauna which can lead to learning more about nature and the environment one is hiking in.

Another area that is heavily studied that is tangential to this research is education and communities. For example, Chung, (2013) researched support groups and online communication. The study showed how support groups sometimes move online. It showed that some people have a preference for online support groups over in-person groups as it allowed people to be more honest with one another while adding a degree of anonymity by not having to interact in person (Chung 2013). While some studies demonstrate the risks of discussing sensitive topics online for monitored support groups, not having another person present can promote honesty and save people from some of the shame of admitting wrongdoing to another person's face.

Parasocial Relationships

Another aspect of online interaction that has only begun to be studied is the idea of a parasocial relationship. Parasocial interaction is

> "A term coined by Horton and Wohl in 1956 to refer to a kind of psychological relationship experienced by members of an audience in their mediated encounters with certain performers in the mass media, particularly on television. Regular viewers come to feel that they know familiar television personalities almost as friends" (Oxford Reference)

As gaming has grown, so has the presence of gaming on sites such as Youtube and Twitch. Twitch is a live streaming website where the streamer runs a real-time video of whatever

they are doing to an audience. This is often gaming, chatting, or just talking to those that are watching them through a chat service. Twitch has become a dominant streaming service as it was the first to create a functional chat for people to talk to the streamer in real-time. A chat essentially comments on the stream that is shown to the streamer in real-time. This has led to a new dynamic where a fan has a direct connection to the influencers or social media celebrities they watch. This has led to parasocial relationships, or a one-sided relationship between a fan and a celebrity (Atallah, 2020). It is not one-sided in the sense that one side gets nothing, it is one-sided in the sense that the fan knows all about the celebrity and feels as if they are friends with the celebrity and the celebrity knows nothing about the fan and probably does not know they exist beyond being a statistic. This has only really been seen with athletes and movie stars, but in these cases, social media does not give direct access to a celebrity. Given how much is shared on sites such as Youtube and Twitch some fans feel like they have almost become friends with the online celebrity that they watch and attempt to interact with (Atallah, 2020).

Parasocial relationships can become worse due to a celebrity using streaming services such as Youtube or Twitch. For example, during a Livestream (or the live footage of the streamer that app such as Twitch show), fans can spend money to subscribe to or send a highlighted message to the streamer (the celebrity who is hosting the Livestream). This means that viewers see that a way to have a celebrity interact with them is to spend their own money. This leads to streamers making large amounts of money on their streams. For example, the streamer xWcOW made around 8.5 million dollars between august 2019 and October 2021 (Max Miceli, 2021). This is not including merchandise sales and other revenue streams. xQc is also the number 2 streamer on Twitch and not all streamers make that much money. However, even if the number is smaller, streamers are making money off of the engagement of their fans. The famous streamer

Pokimane capped her donations at five dollars when she saw fans were spending their life's savings to be noticed by the streamer. Even if streamers ask their fans not to donate, as some have, it will not stop people from spending money to try and gain the attention of the celebrities they follow.

The drive to gain attention from fans can be used for positive means such as charity (See for example Tassi, 2015). Streamers and Youtubers regularly set up videos or streams to raise money for charities and some have donated thousands of dollars, and a few have ended up donating millions of dollars. For example, the Youtuber Mr. Beast has organized the donations of hundreds of millions of dollars to plant trees and at the time of writing is organizing money to clean ocean pollution (Leskin, 2019). Much of the money raised is collected from stream donations and comes from the fans of the celebrity. Some come from other celebrities and companies who support the cause, but a large part of the money comes from the fans.

These parasocial relationships have also led to some celebrities using their fame and relationships with their fans for scams and other predatory behaviors. Cryptocurrency pump and dumps (inflating the price of a cryptocurrency by using influence to have people buy it and later selling when a peak is reached and leaving the losses on those that were convinced to buy and hold the cryptocurrency) have become more common for internet celebrities (Gottsegen, 2022). Cryptocurrencies such as Save the Kids Coin and other coins have become the source of alleged pump and dump scams that were promoted by influencers (Britton, 2021).

These parasocial relationships have only become the subject of research and scrutiny very recently. This is partially due to the systems that create parasocial relationships only coming into being with the advent of social media. There has been research on parasocial relationships based

on larger-scale celebrities such as athletes and movie stars, but there is a lack of research on micro-influencers such as Twitch streamers and YouTubers.

Social Media

Social media interaction is one of the most studied forms of online interaction. One prevalent topic explored in this research is the impact social media has on people's mental health. Booker et al (2018) found a correlation between depressive symptoms and social media use. Another study Cecconi, et al (2020) focuses on how schadenfreude (taking joy from another's suffering) can come about in social media interactions. Four types of schadenfreude were found in the study; "Compensation, Identification, Aversion, and Injustice Schadenfreude" (Cecconi et al, 2020).

Online interactions especially around contentious topics such as politics can become arguments extremely quickly. Much of the discourse on the internet has turned toxic and plays out as people try to make the other look stupid or wrong. This is also heightened by the anonymity that some services provide. Websites such as 4chan where perceived anonymity is one selling point have become a petri dish for radicalized, racist, and othering viewpoints. For example, Durrheim et. al. (2015) looked at how racism presents itself in online interactions finding Both blatant racism and dog whistles are seen as unacceptable in normal discourse, however, when someone is protected by anonymity social rules do not hold the same way (Durrheim et al, 2015).

There is a large base of research around the internet, social media, and gaming addiction such as *Video gaming in a hyperconnected world: A cross-sectional study of heavy gaming, problematic gaming symptoms, and online socializing in adolescents. Computers in Human Behavior*. This focuses on internet addiction and its relationship to depressive and anxiety mental

health symptoms (colder et al, 2016). This shows some of the outcomes of prolonged gaming. This focused on students and has some focus on gaming. It is more focused however on those that are addicted to gaming and the consequences of that addiction. This means that often much of their online interaction is instead of in-person interactions. This also focused on finding the symptoms that coincide with video game addiction and the mental health consequences of video gaming addiction. Another similar piece of literature is *Re-Visiting Internet Addiction among Taiwanese Students: A Cross-Sectional Comparison of Students' Expectations, Online Gaming, and Online Social Interaction.* The study was meant to find the link between internet expectations and gaming addiction. Behavior and attitude were also looked at to find a link to gaming addiction. Studies have also been done with slightly older populations. *Social Comparisons, Social Media Addiction, and Social Interaction: An Examination of Specific Social Media Behaviors Related to Major Depressive Disorder in a Millennial Population* focuses specifically on the millennial population. It also looked at social media addiction which is often tangentially related to gaming. Those who game often also use social media especially related to the games that they play. This is also a dynamic in social media, which is the focus of *Digital Buddies': Parasocial Interactions in Social Media.* This looked at parasocial relationships with the use of social media as opposed to streaming sites and video sites.

Gaming

Griffiths et al (2011) look at the exact area that is the focus of this study. It focused on interactions in MMOs (Massively multiplayer online games). Examples of popular MMOs are *World of Warcraft*, *Destiny* and *Destiny 2*, and *Final Fantasy XIV.* Griffiths (2011) states,

> "It is clear to see that computer games appear to play a role in the socialization of heavy game players particularly for those who play MMORPGs. Krotoski (2004) maintains that MMORPGs encourage group interaction and involvement, flexibility and mastery, resulting in significant friendships and personal empowerment." (Griffiths 2011).

MMOs are a great example of the long-term social interactions that can happen in games. While there is a large basis of research done on those that are addicted to MMO games there are plenty of players who have a healthy relationship with games. These players will log in either with friends, or the games naturally push people together to create groups. As an example in the game *Destiny 2,* one of the main features is raids. These are missions that require 3-6 players and coordination between the players. These missions can last hours and intense strategy and communication with others will quickly stop them from being strangers.

In gaming, many people try to manipulate the other team by being negative and the interactions can become very hostile. Many gamers are used to bad behaviors such as "sexual harassment, hate speech, threats of violence, doxing (publicizing others' private information), spamming, flaming (strong emotional statements meant to elicit negative reactions), griefing (using the game in unintended ways to harass others), and intentionally inhibiting the performance of one's own team" (Wired, 2020). Bad interactions online may lead to some reluctance to play multiplayer video games. Many people avoid games with especially toxic communities.

Symbolic Interaction

Symbolic interaction theories shape some of the research that has been done on online interactions. Symbolic interaction theory focuses on how interactions change and shift based on feedback from who one is talking to.

> "Symbolic interactionism theory assumes that people respond to elements of their environments according to the subjective meanings they attach to those elements, such as meanings being created and modified through social interaction involving symbolic communication with other people." (Nickerson, 2021).

There are many studies on online interaction that are based around different aspects of symbolic interaction theory (See for example, Reich et al., 2018).

Research has been done on how likes and dislikes can form the elements of symbolic interaction. When one posts on social media such as Facebook, others can react to posts with likes, and on some sites dislikes. Reich et al., 2018 set out to find the effects of a "like" on Facebook. "Likes seem to be a currency for self-esteem and belonging, and few Likes boost self-esteem and belongingness to a lesser extent than many Likes." (Reich et al., 2018). Social media likes can be tied to feelings of self-esteem and belonging. The study also showed that likes can have a different value depending on who is liking a post although "who gives the Likes is minor compared to the sheer number of Likes" (Reich et al., 2018).

Another major theory that stems from symbolic interaction is "the looking glass self", which was coined by Charles Horton Cooley; "The looking-glass self describes the process wherein individuals base their sense of self on how they believe others view them"(Lesley University). This likely applies to much of what is being looked at in this study as to how one

receives reactions in social settings changes when you lose facial expression or tone when an interaction is moved online.

Workplace

Workplaces have seen sweeping changes due to the pandemic. Working from home has become far more normalized and accepted except with some exceptions. Many companies especially in the tech industry have adopted a permanent policy of working from home. This has been incredibly helpful for people with long commutes and other reasons why working from home is advantageous, however, this is not the case for everyone. For some working from an office has been far easier and can remove one from the distractions of their own home.

While Zoom can be an extremely useful tool it can also encourage some of the problems that have presented themselves in the modern workplace. The idea that a worker should always be available because they are around technology has become an issue in some workplaces. Dettmers et al (2016) studied extended workdays and how they affect mood and cortisol. COVID and Zoom conferencing may lead to a practice where people are paid during normal hours but are expected to answer calls or emails at any time of day or night; “The opportunity to work at any time and place, which is facilitated by mobile communication technologies, reinforces employer expectations that employees are available for work beyond regular work hours” (Jan Dettmers et al, 2016). This issue was exacerbated by the pandemic and has led to many workplaces essentially forcing their employees to always be ready to receive calls or messages but are not compensated for the time they are “on-call”. Especially with the pandemic and push for working from home, “Employees (and employers) feel pressured into responding immediately to communications after hours. Email notifications and phone calls chime us through each weekend and get us searching for vacation spots boasting minimal service or

banning cell phones altogether. “Nonwork hours during which employees are expected to respond to work issues constrain employee behavior” (Victoria Turner, 2016).

One company approach to creating a more functional system for working online was Gitlab. An article discussing their work from home practices found, “Working from home in an effective way goes beyond just giving employees a laptop and a Zoom account. It encompasses practices intended to compensate or avoid the core limitations of working remotely, as well as fully leverage the flexibility that remote can offer — working not only from anywhere but at any desired time” (Marco Minervini, et al. 2021). The article shows how GitLab is helping keep productivity while also adapting to a more online workforce. Not all changes to the workplace have been negative.

Working from home has been a large boon for many people; “People who have never liked schmoozing with colleagues have found new heights of productivity away from meetings and office chit chat. People worried about climate change are eager to reduce their carbon footprints by avoiding commutes by car. And while many parents are desperate for schools and daycare centers to reopen, some working parents are appreciating more time with their children" (Maria Cramer et al, 2020). Working from home has been a massive improvement for those with long commutes or who prefer to work in a less social environment.

Other Relevant Studies

Research that is more directly related to online interactions and the differences from in-person interactions does exist (See for example Chung 2013). There is not as much literature and most lack the gaming interactions as a focus. One example is The Dynamics of Emotions in Online Interaction (Garcia, 2016). This study focuses on emotion and online interactions. It looks at collective emotion and the changes to group emotion when participating online compared to

in-person (Garcia et al. 2016). When socialization is not done in a face-to-face setting and is instead done online the ways emotion is communicated change. It is much harder to communicate emotions such as sarcasm when in text-based interactions which have led to some solutions such as emotion indicators on websites. Some examples of emotion indicators are /s which means the text is sarcastic or /gen which means the text is genuine. While some people mock tone indicators they have been especially helpful for those that have more trouble parsing the tone of comments. Many people with various mental illnesses find it helpful to understand if statements are sarcastic or genuine, however, some find the idea of tone indicators useless and mock them online. This is similar to the previously discussed literature on racism in online interactions. Many people would not openly mock a tool that is meant to help those that need tone indicators due to conditions such as autism, but when given anonymity many filters around interactions cease to exist.

Conclusion

There is a need for more studies relating to social interactions in gaming. Especially with the COVID-19 pandemic, it must be understood how online interactions work and the massive spike in the population in regards to playing video games means that research must be done to understand how interactions work in one of the most popular forms of entertainment and hobby. Most data has been done to see the effects of social media, the internet, gaming addictions, or schoolwork. Almost nothing focuses on healthy gaming habits and social interactions. There is also a lack of literature regarding older generations. Almost all of the literature is focused on adolescents to young adults around their 30s. The literature that does exist shows correlations between internet/gaming addiction and mental illness symptoms. These symptoms are those of anxiety disorders or depressive symptoms. A causal effect has not been found but a correlation

between internet addictions and mental illness symptoms seems to be the consensus. There are benefits and ways that online interaction through social media or gaming can be beneficial. For example, MMOs may strengthen friendships or creative ways to make new friends, and friendships made through video games can be extremely strong and last a lifetime.

There is a lack of research on the qualitative difference between online and in-person social interactions. The differences in how tones are communicated, how the conversations flow with the delays due to latency, or the delay in responses due to how information moves, and other factors that are not present when communicating in person. This can be in the workplace, networking, or just everyday social interactions with one's friends, community, family, etc… Looking at the differences in these interactions can help show ways to mitigate the negative aspects of online interactions and promote the positive aspects.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

I conducted in-depth interviews in-person and over Zoom as needed. I interviewed a convenience sample of Union College students between the ages of 18-22. Five students were interviewed. The answers the participants gave were recorded and the themes that came up in the interviews were used as data points. The sample was drawn from people I know who had significant technology and online game experiences. As they were people I know all of the participants are students at Union College. They were people who are all gamers to some degree and know of non-gaming social media apps but do not necessarily use them.

The study was exempted from institutional review as there was no risk to participation. Participants were first asked if it is ok to record the interview. Upon agreement they were told about the study and the kinds of questions would be asked. Then they were told that if they did not wish to answer a particular question they could move on or if they would like to stop the interview at any time they could.

Interviews and interview questions

During interviews, I asked about experiences with online interactions, how they felt conversations go online (conversation flow and other aspects), and other pertinent questions. These questions were meant to gauge how familiar the participants were with internet use. They asked about the social media and gaming habits of others they encountered online to understand the depth of knowledge each participant had about online interactions. I also asked questions about how often participants engaged in in-person interactions and the kinds of differences they experienced between both worlds and how each of these interactions has changed since the start of the recent COVID-19 pandemic

I chose to do one-on-one in-depth interviews. I believe that I would not be able to obtain long answers to the more open questions had this study been done through a survey format. I did not think people would be as open or reflective about their interactions if they were looking at a survey and had to write down answers. I also chose interviews as there is some flexibility regarding the questions. If participants said for instance that they had never used Twitch, they were not asked to answer other questions about their experiences with Twitch. Alternatively, more questions were posed if it was clear that the participant had relevant experiences they had not shared. However, each interview involved the same base questions that were always asked (See appendix A for questions).

The questions in the interview were open-ended and mostly focused on experiences interacting with others in online situations and face-to-face situations. Participants were asked about positive experiences they have had online, negative experiences they have had online, as well as positive experiences they have had in person, and negative experiences they have had in person. Participants were asked about apps and services they may have used. In particular, Discord is discussed with participants as it is one of the main ways people interact around games. Twitch and live streaming services were also discussed in the interviews. The participants were asked about gaming as a whole and besides Twitch and Discord, no specific apps or platforms were mentioned in the questions.

The first set of questions asked about demographic characteristics of participants, such as race, gender, age, their current occupation, their highest degree of education, where they are going to school, and the year they are currently in college. They were then asked how often they use technology as a gauge to see if the amount of time they use technology can change how their online interactions go. They were asked if they feel they are adept at using technology to see if

how good they feel they are with technology changes how they feel interactions go online or in-person. Next, participants were asked what social media they use as that will also help gauge what they use social media for and then how much they use apps such as Discord or if they play video games. They were asked how many of the games they play are multiplayer as that can largely influence how much social interaction they have online. They were asked what kinds of interactions they have in games or on apps such as Discord and to recount some memorable online interactions.

Then, participants were asked what they use Discord and other gaming-related social media apps for other than for team chat while gaming. They were asked how they feel interactions on Discord differ from interactions on other social media sites. They were asked how much time they think they spend in an average week participating in in-person social interactions (Not for class or work). They were asked if they prefer online interactions over in-person interactions to see if there is a difference in how interactions work if one does not prefer interactions being in person. They were asked how they think online interactions differ from in-person interactions to see if there are differences that can be identified by the participants. They were asked what they may talk about in person that they would not do online. This will also show how comfortable the participant is in interactions and how that may change with a layer of anonymity.

They were asked if they have spent more time online due to the COVID pandemic and how they think online interactions have changed due to the COVID pandemic. If needed, additional probing questions were asked based on my experience that the internet has grown considerably since the beginning of the COVID pandemic. Participants were asked if they have used live-streaming apps and how much time they use them. They will also be asked about their

experiences with Twitch and other live streaming services. They were asked if they know what a parasocial relationship is if they do not know it was explained that “Parasocial relationships are one-sided relationships, where one person extends emotional energy, interest and time, and the other party, the persona, is completely unaware of the other’s existence” (Bennet et al, 2020). They were asked if they or others they know of are participating in a parasocial relationship. They were asked if they feel Twitch has changed due to the pandemic if it is relevant to the participant. Finally, the participants were asked how they feel things as a whole have changed online.

Analysis

A thematic analysis was used for the data collected by this study. The analysis was conducted by finding themes throughout the interviews that came from quotes given by participants. Using a spreadsheet program, the themes and answers that were given were recorded for analysis. I employed an inductive approach which “involves allowing the data to determine your themes” (Caulfield, 2022). I wanted to draw conclusions from the finding of the study as opposed to starting with themes and having the answers validate or invalidate them. Once I identified themes, the quotes were organized by which themes they related to. When applicable were broken down further into subthemes. This happened if themes arose that can be explained by multiple different answers. Themes were somewhat open to interpretation but were less biased as the answers are coming directly from the participants. If the themes were created deductively it may be more biased depending on how familiar the researcher is with the themes of the study and prior opinions (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS

Sample Characteristics

To assist the clarity of the analysis a brief description of the participants and their technology and online experience is written below:

Participant 1

Participant 1 was a white male who was 22 and a full-time student at Union College. He was a Senior. He said he used technology “the majority of his waking hours” and felt he was fairly adept with technology. He said he regularly uses Discord, Twitter, and Slack. He said he plays games around 8 hours a week and claimed he is constantly on Discord and often checks it every 15 minutes. He plays very few multiplayer games and the ones he does play are with friends and not often strangers.

Participant 2

Participant 2 is a white male who was 19 and is currently a full-time student at Union College as a Sophomore. He said he uses technology around 40 hours a week if music being played in the background counts. He does not feel he is adept with newer technology. He said he regularly uses Reddit, Snapchat, and Gmail. He claims he spends around 4 to 8 hours a week playing games and that only around 20% of his time gaming is spent playing multiplayer games. He said he rarely uses Discord.

Participant 3

Participant 3 was white, chose to not state a gender. Was 21 and is a full-time student at Union College. The participant was a senior. The participants said they use technology around 12-15 hours a week and considered themselves adept with “consumer-level technology”. The participants said they use Instagram, Snapchat, Imessage, and Discord. They said they game around 5 hours a week and use Discord a similar amount. The participant said they only play one multiplayer game.

Participant 4

Participant 4 was a white male who is a full-time student. He is 21 and currently is a senior at Union College. He said he uses technology 80% of the time he is awake and considers himself more adept with technology than many. He regularly uses Snapchat, Slack, and Discord. He said he uses Discord and plays games around 20-30 hours a week. He said half of the time he plays video games it is multiplayer.

Participant 5

Participant 5 is a white male and a full-time student. He is 22 and is a senior attending Union College. He said he uses technology as little as 8 hours a day and up to 12 hours a day. He feels he has a good grasp on technology but feels he is not as adept as some his age. He said he regularly uses Twitter, Reddit, Instagram, and rarely Snapchat and Facebook. He said he plays games an average of 3-4 hours a day. He said on Discord he is on calls one or two hours maximum a week and he mostly uses Discord for messaging. He says around half of the video games he plays are multiplayer.

Throughout the interviews, some of the questions and several themes were raised and elaborated upon by participants. While there were apparent themes, many of them also ran counter to the themes that came up in other interviews. For instance, how comfortable one is sharing more personal experiences online ranges from “I mean I'm a pretty open book” to “I don't talk about myself online, I don't need people to know who I am unless they already know me”. All participants acknowledged that due to the COVID-19 pandemic far more people are online than before and it is far more normalized. While some answers differed, major themes did become apparent. The themes that emerged were, participants not being as intimate in conversations online. Participants also all stated they preferred in-person interactions over online ones. Another interesting theme was the idea that online platforms would be used to keep in contact with people where in-person interaction is not possible.

Theme 1: In-person interactions are more intimate and open

Theme one centered around the idea that, for various reasons, in-person interactions were far more open and could handle more intimate topics. This was partially due to how text-based interactions are perceived by various participants, “I like that when you are in person you can kind of have multiple tracks of conversation going on whereas online it's like everybody is connected to one conversation” as opposed to “it makes interactions more flexible in a way in that you can just sort of bringing topics up, you can drop them, you can bring them up whenever”. The same participant spoke about how you are not expected to always answer instantly in Discord like you are in person. This quote can be assumed to be speaking about the text chat aspects of Discord as this may not be possible for people speaking in real-time. However, for text chats, you can reply to old messages and keep older conversations going. The former quote about not being able to have multiple conversations highlights an aspect that can

make voice chat harder. Unless you specifically adjust people's volumes, everyone will have different levels of loudness. Unlike in-person conversations, one cannot go to a different part of a room and have a conversation where it is not as loud. When everyone is on the same voice call (like a phone conversation through an app with varying numbers of people participating in the call) everyone hears everyone else and leaving the call to talk to specific people could be seen as rude or even hostile.

Subtheme 1:Being online is not as open due to a lack of social cues

Many of the participants shared they felt that they could not be as open online as they could in person. For example, one participant stated, "I mean serious topics are more likely to come up in person, they have come up online before but it's like usually even when they come up online it's like let's finish this conversation in person so we can get what we are trying to say across". While one is gaming, generally features such as live video are not used. This means that you are not seeing the face of the person you are talking to. You may hear their voice but you will rarely see the face of the person you are talking to. This issue is exacerbated by the common use of text chats. Text chats only use text, and sometimes images. They have no voice associated with them and text is not good for indicating tone in conversation. It is almost impossible to indicate tone and emotion over texts. There are some ways such as using capital letters and tone indicators but it is still far from conveying a message's true tone. When online if a message is written with all capital letters it is seen as yelling. It is often perceived as aggressive or angry but is sometimes just used to indicate excitement. Tone indicators are words placed at the end of a sentence to indicate the tone that whoever wrote the sentence is trying to convey. The most common tone indicators are /s which means the sentence was sarcastic, or /gen which means the sentence was genuine. While this can help convey tone, some do not use them as they feel it goes

against the idea of sarcasm to specifically spell out when one is being sarcastic. These intricacies can hinder social interactions and keep more intimate conversations off of online platforms.

Subtheme 2: Dislike of strangers knowing about you

A subtheme of why people preferred in-person interaction was a general discomfort with strangers knowing personal information. While interactions online with strangers are expected, many people will limit the information about their lives that is openly available. One participant stated, “I don’t like people who I don’t know knowing things about me”. There is a distinct difference in all participants between private servers made by friends and more public servers that are focused on interests. This is because often private servers do not have open invitations. It is groups of friends and sometimes people who met online making a server for a smaller group. Often the members of private servers know each other in person and one will not encounter strangers in private servers. Participants were far more open when it was a small group of friends on a private server, one participant said when “I know who is going to be seeing those things . . . I talk about the same things with those people that I would talk about in person”. Later it was stated that “I guess the division here is between people I know and people I don’t know”. The participants were generally uncomfortable with the idea of somebody online knowing about them. One participant even stated that they try to have the smallest online footprint they can. This may partly be due to sites like Discord being anonymous unless you link your social media accounts to your Discord account which many people do not do. Even when one does link social media accounts it is often to other gaming-focused anonymous apps such as Twitch, a live streaming platform, and Steam, a video game market and launcher.

Theme 2: Gaming Persona

Another theme that was touched upon was the idea of a gaming persona. For example, one participant when asked how Discord was different from other social media sites said, “it's the only social media website that I display my gaming username that is not Reddit, and Reddit is anonymous”. Apps such as Instagram and Snapchat tie the account to the person. Jobs and colleges and other organizations attempting to learn about a person have been known to look at a person’s social media. However, apps such as Discord are not usually looked at as it is often smaller more focused groups or a group of existing friends. The fact that Discord is not tied to a name and shows your gaming username means that people do not know who you are unless you want them to. When people play video games they often enjoy a degree of anonymity. This is often good in multiplayer games as you are not bogged down by personal life or other issues. Anonymity online is not always positive as some people can have usernames that can single out groups or identities. An example I have experienced was a user in the game *Tom Clancy’s Rainbow Six Siege* who had a username similar to “Gas The Jews”. It is fairly common in online games to hear racial slurs or hateful messages. When one is anonymous they feel they can say anything and not have it come back to them. A participant noted that “sometimes after games finish, you get friend requests from people and they will message me, typically saying negative things”. Being anonymous in gaming can be a boon but it can also come at the cost of people abusing their anonymity.

Theme 3: Interactions when In-Person is not possible

Some of the participants spoke about how they used Discord to keep in contact with friends in different states or that they cannot be available for in-person interactions. One participant said:

> "If all of the people that I stay in contact with on Discord were like physically in the same place as me we wouldn't be on Discord nearly as much right, we'd be hanging at each other's houses, we'd be going to bars. So I think I prefer in-person interactions but the realities of life mean that digital interactions are more reliable in a lot of ways".

If interacting with everyone in person was possible they would not use Discord to interact but Discord is an easy way to keep in contact. It is not as formal or public as Instagram and Snapchat and it can create small groups that are not visible unlike joining a group on Facebook. It is easier to keep in contact when the person can see messages you send them almost instantaneously. It is also easy, as when people are free they can hop into a voice call at a moment's notice. The pandemic has meant that for a long time people could not interact face-to-face, and even before the pandemic Discord was used for friend groups that could not meet in person. Discord and other social apps can be used as a substitute for in-person interaction. While using apps to talk to friends may not be preferred, it is a viable alternative.

Theme 4: How COVID has changed online interactions

While not all participants had the same experience, all acknowledged that COVID-19 has changed the online world. Almost all platforms, not just gaming ones, have seen an increase in users. The markets based around gaming have skyrocketed and many games publishers have

reported record profits during the lockdown and height of the pandemic. The rise in the use of online social media and gaming sites was noted by participants with two major explanations.

Subtheme 1: Online interaction is more normalized

Using online apps for interaction is far more normalized; “people are just using online methods of connecting a lot more than they used to, even just something like Zoom where like that existed before COVID for a while, and I used it for one of my classes in high school, and then suddenly it just kind of took off, it was like what the heck they are using that?. And now it's one of the most common ways of communicating online”. Before the pandemic people were, for the most part, not using apps like Zoom and Discord was a far more niche app. It was still used, but not nearly as much. Only one participant talked about using Zoom before the beginning of the pandemic. Office workers have also begun to use Zoom and Teams and other online platforms, which may be part of how online interactions have become more normalized. One participant spoke of how his parents would never have thought of doing meetings on a computer but now they do every day. All generations have had to start using online methods for interactions, which makes using online platforms for fun more normalized.

Subtheme 2: Many more people are participating in online interactions because of the COVID Pandemic

COVID forced many people into their homes, and when one cannot leave their house they lose the possibility to have in-person interactions except for family or roommates. This gap as was shown in a previous theme can be filled through the use of social media or gaming apps. Because of this, apps like Twitch and Discord have skyrocketed in use, and the participants did

reflect that in their answers. Participants talked about how during the lockdown they spent time online as online interactions are a stand-in many people go to when in-person interactions are not possible. One participant said that during “the first year of the pandemic especially people really had to spend most of it in their homes, its an outlet. If you are bored around your house, getting on social media, or getting on more direct social media like Discord or Zoom, or playing video games its the way to go”. People have not been able to interact with their friends and family and thus many aspects of everyday life have needed to change. In-person sports are not possible, in-person board games cannot be played, and that has driven many people to play video games with one another. People need an outlet for fun with friends and not just platforms for talking with one another. This led to the growth of virtual board games, sports video games, and multiplayer games in general. Some people began playing even games they did not like to stay connected with their friends and have something to do while in lockdown. Participants seemed to think the growth in online interaction was interesting. They did not seem upset or even particularly happy. It just seemed the participants found it interesting. There were some positive feelings as it seemed like participants were happy that older generations were beginning to operate with a greater understanding of online interaction. One participant was not interested in the growth of Twitch. He spoke on how Twitch had grown and how it was conducive to what some people needed during the pandemic. Twitch’s long-form content can help those that are bored and need to kill time. The Parasocial relationships that can come from Twitch can also help people feel they have a friend while going through a hard time. There may be some negative consequences associated with parasocial relationships but they certainly helped people weather the lockdown.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

There are varying levels of technology use and aptitude among the participants in this study. However, despite the differences between participants major themes did appear in the answers. An interesting finding was how participants spoke about being less open online. This runs counter to much of the symbolic interaction theories that have been done on social media. The difference may be due to the platforms that were being focused on in this study. People may be more open on platforms that are based around one's identity, whereas on Discord or Twitch there is a level of anonymity as it is built around one's gaming persona. It would be likely beneficial to ask similar questions based on other social media platforms. It would be beneficial to see if social interactions are different when done on platforms that are based on one's identity.

The finding that participants believed that online tools for interaction have grown and become more normalized is consistent with the data of social media and gaming usage during the pandemic. It is worth noting that during the time this study was conducted Union College installed a Nintendo Switch video game console in one of the main social areas on campus. There was an empty space in the campus center and once it had a video game console it immediately gained a constant rotation of students sitting with one another playing video games. One of the largest clubs at Union College is based around gaming. Video games and their culture have become far more normalized in the last decade, especially during and after the pandemic, and that was reflected in the participants' answers.

The theme of online interactions being used as a stand-in for in-person interactions was not explored in much of the literature and may benefit from further looks at social groups that started in person and had to move online and the differences in social dynamics in those groups. However the findings about more intimate interactions online differed somewhat from some of

the literature. Chung, 2013 found that in support groups many people preferred online interaction to offline interactions. Because these conversations were being done for support groups these were fairly intimate conversations. The difference in the findings of that study may be because of the setting. If someone is looking for a support group they may want to talk about topics they do not want friends or acquaintances to hear about.

The substitution of in-person interactions through online means was consistent with Ciciora, 2010. The article spoke about how online methods can be used to strengthen communities. The participants spoke about using online means to keep in touch with friends. A participant spoke of how a private Discord server of old friends has kept him very close to those friends. He said if he was not on Discord with them he would see them in person. While the participant still preferred to interact with those friends in person, his private discord survey was a useful tool to keep the relationship from fading. The use of Discord had strengthened his friendships and meant that even though they were physically apart the friendship did not fade as many do in long distance situations.

The findings in this study were somewhat different from some of the research on applying symbolic interaction to online interactions. The participants did not want to disclose information about themselves. They also seemed to not care about negative interactions that they had online which runs counter to the idea of the "looking glass self". The looking glass self describes how people base themselves around feedback they receive from peers (Lesley University). It seems interactions online are valued less than ones in person. One of the participants spoke about how most of his interactions in the game *Hearthstone* consist of getting a friend request, accepting it, and then being sent an angry message by the person he had just beat. More intimate interactions do not happen as often and interactions with peers seem

guarded. This finding was also consistent with the study done by Reich et al, 2018. The study had found that while likes on posts had a positive impact on the mood of the poster, a lack of likes did not have the same level of a negative response. The study also found that the likes were not all of equal importance. Likes given by friends and family came with far higher levels of emotional response than strangers or acquaintances.

The findings did however follow some other aspects of symbolic interaction theory. For instance the findings on the "gaming persona theme" where it was noted that on apps like Discord, Steam, and Reddit one can operate under their "gaming persona". This is a more anonymous alias that can be tailored to what the user wants to show. When one is doing things under an alias they can show only the good aspects of their lives. This also lines up with the information on the use of social media. Social media is often used to show ideal versions of oneself when it is tied to one's own identity. Much like the use of Finsta, people do not share more intimate information with a wider social network, and instead, only share information with smaller groups of trusted friends (*Merriam-Webster*). Even in larger and more anonymous groups users can choose what information they want to share. This could range from sharing nothing online as some of the participants said to the common practice on apps like Tik Tok of trauma dumping to the public. However in the context of gaming related interactions the participants mostly felt that they did not want strangers to know personal information.

The opinions of the participants accurately reflected the data that the online world is growing. The participants also reflected the literature that online interactions are being normalized in different settings. Jobs are using video conferencing, schools are using video calls for classes, and during the lockdown, people turned to video games for entertainment and camaraderie. Participants almost all stated that they had used technology more since the

beginning of the pandemic. They all reported being online for dozens of hours a day and even those that felt they were not as adept with technology were using technology for much of their days. All participants also distinguished their time having fun online vs the work business they had to do online. While many participants spent significant time online for fun, they also all spent their time doing schoolwork or other non-fun time online.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Limitations

It is worth noting that the participants are fairly social people with their own distinct friend groups as the participants were chosen using convenience sampling. None of the participants are people who isolate themselves from others. If this analysis was to be done again it would be helpful to find people who may spend less time interacting with people in person and more time online. It was also heavily weighted towards male participants, and all participants were college-aged. It may be worth repeating this study on different demographic groups such as older generations or with more diversity of gender.

Participants also consistently did not know what a parasocial relationship was and if they did claim they did not participate in one. A study on parasocial relationships in gaming could be done and one may want to place focus on a group that is more likely to engage in such a relationship. This could be done on a group formed around an influencer, or possibly certain musical groups.

Future research may be done on the specific social dynamics in the different means of online interactions. Research could be done on text chats, voice calls, and video calls as all of those methods function very differently. Research could also be done on people with little knowledge of gaming and its dynamics. Interactions may be different on other social media platforms. Future research could also be done with more randomized participants to make the research more applicable to a larger population. Future studies may delve deeper into gaming personas and how the identity one portrays on certain sites and apps changes your interactions. The findings in this study on the lack of social cues could lead to research being done on the effectiveness of tools such as tone indicators.

Findings

This study was done to find the differences between online and in-person social interactions. Much of the current literature focuses on the mental health effects of gaming, online work, and social media. There is a lack of literature on the dynamics of online interactions.

Another purpose of this research was to find out how online communications, especially through gaming have changed through the course of the pandemic. This study was also done to find how online interactions differ from similar in-person interactions. While there were questions about new types of relationships that have formed due to online interactions that came about due to the pandemic, not much information was given by participants. Participants largely said they did not participate in parasocial interactions, and those that already knew of them had done their best to no longer participate in those relationships.

Participants spoke about how they preferred in-person interactions as online interactions are less open especially when done outside of pre-established groups. This was due to a lack of social cues as well as outside of groups not wanting strangers to have too many details about one's life. The participants talked about differences interacting on gaming-focused platforms due to using a gaming persona instead of one's real-life identity. Those that were part of the study reported that while they all preferred in-person interactions, online interactions were a good substitute that many were already participating in. This was for old friends who live in other parts of the country or world, or as many participants spoke about, online methods were used during the lockdowns that came about because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has normalized the use of online tools for interactions both for fun and for work or school.

Overall this study showed some of the differences that occur when interactions have to move online as well as the impact that the pandemic had on online interactions. It showed how

the pandemic changed how people view online interactions. It illuminated some of the positives and negatives of moving interactions online by choice or as has been the case recently, by necessity.

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APPENDIX

Interview Questions

What is your Race?

What is your gender?

What is your age?

What is your current occupation?

What is your highest degree of education?

Where did you or do you go to school?

What year of college are you in currently?

On average how much would you say you use technology a week?

Would you consider yourself adept with newer technology?

What apps do you use for social networking regularly?

How often do you game or spend time on apps like Discord in an average week?

Do you play video games regularly?

How many of those games are multiplayer?

What kind of interactions with other people do you have in Discord or in games?

Explain some memorable experiences or interactions you have had online (on Discord interacting with other people, or just in general?).

What do you primarily use Discord for other than team chat in gaming? Can you give me some examples?

How do you think interactions on Discord are different from interactions you have through other social networking sites?

How much time do you spend in an in-person social setting on average in a week?

Do you prefer online interactions over in-person interactions and how so?

How do you think online interactions are different from in-person interactions?

What kinds of things do you talk about when talking to others in person that you would not talk about online?

Given the COVID pandemic do you spend more or less time online?

In what ways do you think interacting online has changed with the COVID pandemic?

In my experience more people are online or gaming since the start of the pandemic, what do you think of that?

Have you ever used Twitch or similar live-streaming apps?

How much time on average do you use live streaming services like Twitch.

If so, please tell me some of your experiences with Twitch.

Do you know what a Parasocial relationship is? (If Not Explain it)

Do you or others you know participate in a parasocial relationship? If Yes, How So

Do you think things have changed on Twitch because of the pandemic? If yes, how so?

How do you think things have changed online as a whole due to the pandemic?