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Diverse Gamers: Resistance Through Video Gameplay

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Diverse Gamers and Resistance Through Video Gameplay

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Abstract

With most of the global population engaging with video games, it is crucial to understand the relationship between gaming and the holistic health of players. However, counseling scholarship exploring the relationship between gaming technology and mental health is nascent. Moreover, ethical guidelines in counseling require professionals to further their awareness and competence while working with underrepresented populations (American Counseling Association; ACA, 2014). To address the preceding statements, this two-study dissertation focused on expanding awareness and clinical understanding of video game technology and human experience. The first study used quantitative methods to examine the relationship between race-related stress, motivations to play online video games, and psychological well-being for gamers of color. Results from this study revealed several significant interactions between racialized distress, motivations for online gaming, and psychological well-being. More specifically, gaming motives for recreational gameplay partially mediated the relationship between racialized distress and psychological well-being for gamers of color. The second study used qualitative methods to explore connectedness with Black Queer men who play video games. Findings from the second study underscored the capacity of video games and gaming communities to be beneficial for soothing distress and building life-enriching relationships. Additional insights, limitations, and suggestions for counseling educators, researchers, and practitioners are also discussed.

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Section 1- Introduction

Many people in the United States have been exposed to traumatic adversities that may diminish their overall health (Felitti et al., 1998; Karatekin, 2018). Exposure to stressful adversities may present additional implications when sociocultural and interpersonal factors are considered (Allen, 2001; Carter, 1994; Wyatt, 1990). For example, experiencing ongoing oppression may elicit mental health disorders, dissociative symptoms, and impaired social functioning in minoritized people of color (POC) (Carter et al., 2005; Utsey, 1998). POC are often subjected to racism and discrimination that has been significantly correlated with a diminished self-esteem, increased anxiety, and relational mistrust (Bryant-Davis, 2005; Carter, 1994; DeGruy, 2005; Wyatt, 1990). Moreover, racialized violence often occurs within intimate or institutional relationships, suggesting that psycho-emotional abuse may occur in any relationship where one entity leverages power to harm another (Allen, 2001; Burstow, 2003; Gutowski et al., 2022; Jordan, 2009).

Researchers have presented evidence for links between traumatic exposure and ethno-racial identity (McClendon et al., 2020). Scholars have suggested exposure to racism and oppression elicits stressful responses that mirror symptoms of complex trauma such as dissociation, anxiety, and heightened arousal (Carter et al., 2020; Helms et al., 2012; Utsey, 2002). This suggests race-related stress can be traumatic and relationally disruptive for minoritized persons. While scholars have highlighted nuances in responses to traumatic stress, seeking out community connection may indicate a desire to heal from psycho-emotional pain (Breslau, 1998; Herman, 1992; Jordan, 2009; van der Kolk, 2014). A source of community connection and a medium for healing may be found

within online gaming spaces. In a large-scale survey, Pew Research (2015) found that nearly 72% of Americans engage in video gameplay. In a study, Lenhart et al. (2008) noted that an estimated 97 % of American teenagers play video games. This suggests that most people in the United States will be video game players in the future.

Online communities are catalysts for identity development, relationship-building, conscious awareness, and skill acquisition (Harper et al.,2013; Kubicek, 2013; Yip & Chan, 2021). For Black and affectional minorities, gaming spaces may serve as mediums to enhance authenticity, connect with others, and escape oppression (Gray, 2017, 2018; Harper et al., 2016; Medina, 2021; Ortiz, 2019; Richard & Gray, 2018; Yip et al., 2021). Communal connections through gaming may engender valuable psychosocial resources that support belonging, identity affirmation, resistance to racial and sexual stigma, and overall wellness for Black affectional minority men (Barry et al., 2018; Bowleg, 2013; Detrie & Lease, 2007; DiPillo, 2009; Frost et al., 2016).

Alongside protection from stigmatization, video gameplay has been associated with cognitive and prosocial benefits (Jones et al., 2014; Pallavicini et al, 2018). Gaming researchers have also observed the potential for video games to support various learning styles and academic performance in young gamers (Jafari et al., 2019; Kao et al., 2017). With meaningful connection being a fundamental aspect of a healthy life, scholars suggest that addressing the psycho-emotional harm elicited by racism and oppression requires a relational approach that centers interconnectedness (Banks, 2006; Birrell & Freyd, 2006; Harrell, 2000; Jordan, 2009; Scheeringa & Zeanah, 2001; Smith et al., 2013). Understanding how minoritized gamers utilize video games to curtail stress,

loneliness, and disconnection may benefit mental health professionals supporting them in therapy.

Recent strides within mental health professions have called for institutional and professional efforts to reject societal oppression and support vulnerable populations. For example, the field of psychology acknowledged its contribution to oppression and racist science while declaring its intention to center multicultural and anti-racist practices to support marginalized groups (Canady, 2021). Counseling professionals must also integrate multicultural and social justice approaches while serving culturally diverse clients (Ratts et al., 2016). Moreover, Relational Cultural theory has been noted as a theoretical orientation that supports multicultural awareness and the decolonization of counseling practice (Singh et al., 2020). Thus, this dissertation produced two manuscripts centered on the relational cultural concepts of connection and disconnection for minoritized game players.

In study one the primary researcher will utilize quantitative methods to examine the relationship between racialized distress, gaming motivations, and psychological well-being with POC. In study two the researcher will utilize a qualitative approach to explore the experiences of Black queer men seeking connection through video gameplay. Both studies sought to increase multicultural and social justice awareness in counseling, address underexplored relational cultural concepts, and establish the potential of video games to serve as a buffer against isolation and oppression.

Section 2- Articles

Study 1:

Racialized Distress, Gaming Motives, and Psychological Well-Being in Black Gamers

A large portion of people living in the United States have been exposed to potentially traumatic adversities that may diminish their psychological, relational, and emotional health (Herman, 1992; Felitti et al.,1998). Experiencing distressing incidents disrupts the human capacity to cultivate and maintain enriching relationships (Banks, 2006; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Root, 1992). While experiencing early adversity does not cause trauma, scholars have found strong correlations between traumatic exposure and PTSD symptomology (Eklund et al., 2018). Furthermore, exposure to intensely stressful events may have additional implications when considering sociocultural and interpersonal factors (Allen, 2001; Bernard et al., 2021; Breslau, 1998; Holmes et al., 2016). For example, people of African, Indigenous, Asian, or Lantix descent (POC) are exposed to racism and oppression that heightens their stress levels and diminishes their well-being (Bryant-Davis, 2005; Carter, 2007; Utsey et al., 2002).

The system of racism is multilayered and can occur at an individual, institutional, or cultural level (Jones, 1997; Utsey, 1998). Trauma experts have delineated theoretical and empirical links between race-related stress and experiencing racism and discrimination (Krieger et al., 1996; Utsey, 1998, 1999). Researchers have also observed significant positive associations between the symptomology of childhood trauma, racialized violence, and oppression in survivors of color (Carter et al., 2020; Danieli, 1998). Due to acts of racism often occurring within interpersonal or institutional

relationships, people of color may experience heightened psycho-emotional harm when seeking to establish safe connections (Carter, 2005; Curtois, 2004; Graff, 2014; Kirkinis et al., 2018 Ryff et al., 2003).

Like trauma, societal oppression limits the capacity of minoritized persons to safely navigate their environment and establish meaningful connections with others (Banks, 2006; Crete & Singh, 2014; Jordan, 2009). Moreover, for minoritized groups connectedness is a valuable tool to resist traumatic adversities and oppression. Despite this understanding, there remains a dearth of research examining the relationship between racialized distress, oppression, and reconnection for POC (Helm et al., 2012; Quiros et al., 2020). Healing from traumatic occurrences may involve integrating strategies to support internal and external reconnection (Herman 1992; Banks, 2006; Root, 1992).

With the pervasiveness of traumatic exposure occurring in childhood, survivors may occupy virtual gaming spaces to seek connection with others (Dini, 2012; Felitti et al., 1999; Gray, 2017; Helm et al., 2012). In a large-scale study, nearly 72% of Americans reported engaging in daily video gameplay (Entertainment Software Association, 2015; Pew Research, 2015). Gaming technology scholars have highlighted how gaming can be an adaptive tool that provides opportunities to build enriching relationships that support authenticity, socio-emotional health, engagement, and a sense of power for players (Jackson, 2017; Richard & Gray, 2018; Shaw, 2012; Weissman, 2017; Zhang & Kaufman, 2017). Furthermore, gaming may enhance motivations that fulfill psychosocial needs and resistance to oppression for minoritized gamers (Gray, 2012; Jackson, 2017; Medina, 2021; Melodia et al., 2020; Shi, 2019).

Unfortunately, oppression permeates digital boundaries and manifests in gaming

communities. Racist video game players employ linguistic profiling, verbal harassment, and humiliation to disempower women, POC, and queer gamers (Gray, 2012, 2018; Medina, 2021; Nakamura, 2002). The dominant White, male, heterosexist identity is embedded within virtual gaming design and environments, which often erases or tokenizes POC, affectional minorities, and women (Collins, 2002; Gray, 2012, Medina, 2021; Richard & Gray, 2018; Shaw, 2012). The primary investigator notes the physio-virtual, described as the interplay of a players physiological, affective, and virtual existence, response to oppression may have distinct implications for gamers of color (GoC) who encounter multilayered relational and racialized violations that increase distress and harms their well-being (Breslau, 1998; Carter, 2007; Carter et al., 2020; Utsey et al., 2002). Conversely, by establishing gaming connections, GoC may increase their sense of safety, resilience, and liberation within online and corporeal spaces (Gray, 2012, 2018; Ortiz, 2019; Richard & Gray, 2018). Overall, this work explored the connection between experiences of racialized distress, gaming motivations, and the psycho-emotional well-being of GoC.

Racialized Distress

Racism is a socially constructed system of oppression that disempowers POC through societal beliefs, racialized violence, and institutional maltreatment (Haeny et al., 2021; Utsey, 1999; Winter, 2020). Racism can be observed through discriminative legal and political policies that oppress POC (Kirkinis et al., 2018; Pieterse & Powell, 2016). Scholars have highlighted how oppression, such as racism, may produce racialized stress which has the potential to be traumatic for minoritized groups (Bryant-Davis, 2005; Carter et al., 2007; Eklund et al., 2018; Root, 1992). Moreover, exposure to cultural,

institutional, and individualized racism has a deleterious impact on the psycho-emotional health of POC (Harrell, 2000; Utsey et al., 2002; Williams et al., 2018b). Cognitive, affective, social, and physiological indications of racialized distress may parallel PTSD symptomology. For example, survivors of racist violations report experiencing internal and external mistrust, inauthenticity, and dissociative symptoms that mirror symptomology of childhood abuse (Hemmings & Evans, 2018; Carter, 2005; Wyatt, 1990).

People that have experienced racism also report hyperarousal, avoidance, intrusive thoughts, and feelings of isolation (Carter, 2007; Helms et al., 2012; Williams et al., 2018). Experiencing racialized distress has also been associated with decreased motivation, self-esteem, and cognitive functioning in students of color (Liang & Fassinger, 2008; Reynolds et al., 2010). Furthermore, exposure to racialized assaults has also been observed to predict heightened symptoms of depersonalization, helplessness, sexual malfunctioning, anxiety, and depression in POC (Carter et al., 2020).

Racism functions to dehumanize POC threatening their psychological and relational health. Researchers have examined facets of racialized distress and other stress related phenomena such as ethnoviolence, insidious trauma, complex trauma, transgenerational trauma, racial trauma, or societal trauma (Bryant-Davis, 2005; Cenant, 2022; Danieli, 1998). For this study the researcher describes racialized distress as psycho-emotional wounds that disrupt the well-being and lived trajectories of POC. Racialized distress occurs while encountering oppression such as racism and discrimination within the physio-virtual world. Moreover, incidents linked to racialized distress decrease self

and communal connection for minoritized groups (Allen, 2001; Jordan, 2009; Root, 1992).

Ongoing Oppression

Racism persists, and people of color are exposed to covert and overt maltreatment that is normalized within a White, Eurocentric society**.** Scholars have noted the need to further examine links between intersecting distress and the wellbeing of survivors of color who contend with sociocultural and institutional oppression (Carter et al., 2020; Dugal et al., 2016; Mueser et al., 2004; Nishith et al., 2000; Pelcovitz et al., 1997). What is known is that diverse groups who are exposed to oppressive violence and microaggressions, experience a decrease in cognitive and affective functioning (Edwards & Blokland, 2011; Meyer, 2003).

Researchers have also observed links between racialized distress and chronic health disparities such as higher rates physical and mental health disorders (APA, 2017; Jackson, 1995; Krieger et al., 1996; Paradies, 2006; Utsey, 1998; Winters, 2020). Recently scholars have challenged mental health professionals to consider the influence of oppression as part of DSM-V criteria for PTSD (Holmes et al., 2016). By recognizing the influence of oppression on psychopathology, scholars and clinicians may be better suited to support the needs and present resilience of POC.

Previously, gaming experiences were conceptualized as being disassociated from in real life, or AFK (away from keyboard) experiences. AFK describes the interrelated nature of our physical embodiment and the online technologies that humans engage with daily (Russell, 2020). today the line between online gaming technology and in real life experiences less distinguishable and often overlaps. Counselors should be abreast with

the dual nature of gaming and AFK (away from keyboard) experiences. Video games and online communities are catalysts for resisting AFK (challenges and reimagining one's identity (Gray, 2012, 2017, Shaw 2009). Video games may also foster life-enriching connections and protection from psycho-emotional harm (Gray, 2012, 2017; Medina, 2021). Altogether, gaming and mental health scholarship underscores the need to examine the relationship between video games, the sense of connection, and well-being.

Video Games and Well-Being

Gaming and Disconnection

Researchers have investigated the relationships between gaming, coping, and psychological well-being. The American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2013) provided diagnostic criteria for Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD), described as persistent engagement with video games that inhibits daily functioning. The criterion detailed nine factors that constitute a DSM-5 diagnosis of IGD: (1) intense preoccupation with games; (2) withdrawal symptomology in the absence of internet gaming (irritability, anxiety, or grief); (3) increased tolerance; (4) unsuccessful attempts to limit gameplay; (5) loss of interest in hobbies before becoming a gamer; (6) continued engagement with videogames despite psychosocial challenge; (7) deceiving others to engage in gameplay; (8) using internet games to escape or avoid uncomfortable feelings (e.g., isolation, shame, guilt); and (9) loss of engagement in social and professional relationships.
Scholars have also highlighted the potential of video games to disrupt our emotional and behavioral expression from the tangible world.

Several studies have also examined psycho-emotional and behavioral factors deriving from problematic gaming. For example, Anderson and Dill (2000) found that

exposure to violence in gaming may increase aggressive behaviors in male users in real life. Further, You et al. (2015) observed links between violent video gameplay and a lack of empathy in adolescent gamers.

Video gameplay may also prompt users to disconnect from their physical worlds (Schimmenti & Caretti, 2010). As Griffiths and Meredith (2009) suggested, gamers may isolate or sacrifice real-world interaction in favor of virtual connections. In a systemic review, Guglielmucci et al. (2019) found that excessive gaming could link to dissociative coping for video game players. Similarly, Melodia et al. (2020) found that escapism and avoidant coping styles may predict IGD. Further, Casale et al. (2021) observed links between bodily dissociation and prolonged gameplay. While research exploring the detriments of video games is emerging, gaming technology researchers suggest that motivations for online gameplay fulfill psychosocial needs that may be lacking within a user's physical world (Jackson, 2017; Melodia et al., 2020; Shi, 2019).

Studies examining gaming and IGD have produced mixed findings. For example, in a meta-analysis, Ferguson (2011) found mixed results in defining and measuring problematic gaming. Further, across 33 publications, Ferguson (2011) found that scholarship lacked specificity in describing and validating problematic gaming and significant links to psychological well-being. Additionally, based on the current body of work exploring gaming behaviors, a minuscule number of gamers would meet the diagnostic criteria for a diagnosis of IGD (APA, 2013; Ferguson, 2011). With competing explanations for the psychopathology of gaming, technology scholars caution against determining causal relationships between video gameplay and psychopathology

(Kardefelt-Winther et al.,2017). Furthermore, it is crucial to examine the potential of video games to support motivation and psychological well-being of players (Yee, 2006).

Motivations for Gaming

Scholars have explored the utility of video games to support a range of motivations such as cognitive reasoning, skill-development, companionship, and creativity (Demetrovics et al., 2011; Granic et al., 2014; Yee, 2006). Gaming technology researchers have also elucidated the potential of gaming to enhance motivations for learning. For example, Khenissi et al. (2016) provided evidence for a positive relationship between motivations, video game genre selection, and diverse learning styles for gamers. Jafari et al. (2019) also observed positive links between visual, sequential, and intuitive learning styles and online game-based training with Iranian students.

Moreover, gamification, gaming elements fused with pedagogical tools and strategies, have been observed to moderate the relationship between student attitudes and behaviors for learning outcomes (Huang et al., 2020; Huotari, 2012). Furthermore, gaming science scholars recognize that game design and play can foster knowledge acquisition for users with diverse needs and interests (Gee & Hayes, 2012; Kao et al., 2017).

Video games can serve as mediums for cognitive development and emotional awareness (Amory et al., 1999; Hogle, 1996). For example, video games have been found to support improvements in short-term memory, processing, and problem-solving (Shute et al., 2015). Systemic reviews have also showcased the utility of video games for supporting and motivating players to seek socio-emotional wellness. Jones et al. (2014) found that video games support emotional regulation, decrease loneliness, increase a

sense of accomplishment, and increase relational skills in players. Raith et al. (2017) found that online gaming facilitated social interactions, increased self-esteem, and increased relational satisfaction for couples who play video games together. Additionally, Pallavicini et al. (2018) identified connections between video game-based training and positive cognitive and affective benefits for adults. Alongside cognitive and affectional benefits, gaming may also motivate players to explore their identities and their purpose for connection.

Online communities offer a sense of connection linked to a greater sense of authenticity, identity affirmation, and a conscious awareness for diverse groups (Dini, 2012; Jackson, 2017; Yip & Chan, 2021). Video games motivate players to enhance their sense of connection through online social engagement and community building. Connectedness through gaming fosters an increased sense of belonging, cooperation, motivation, and exchange of knowledge (Przybylski et al., 2010; Gray, 2012; Shaw, 2012; Suler, 2016). Gamers may also increase gameplay time to further connect with others which supports their well-being (Jones et al., 2014; Kirby et al., 2014).

Despite challenges to the benefits of gaming, individuals described as problematic players report that video games felt purposeful and fulfilled a sense of belonging (Shi, 2019). Moreover, motivations and time invested in gaming may be an indication of psychosocial challenges in the physical world in contrast to maladaptive gaming habits (Shi, 2019). This echoes sentiments from researchers who assert that online gaming is not inherently problematic and gaming immersion should be understood within the context of real-world stressors and cultural identities (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014; Király et al., 2017; Melodia et al., 2020; Snodgrass et al., 2014).

Videogames provide opportunities for users to establish meaningful connections that support their well-being and curtail real world distress. GoC may contend with psychosocial challenges within the physical world that motivates them to engage in video gameplay. Although minoritized gamers report encountering racism, homophobia, sexism, and acts of digitized humiliation in gaming spaces, they also express experiencing a sense of safety and belonging within chosen online communities (Gray, 2012,2017; Medina, 2021; Richard & Gray, 2018). Furthermore, video games fulfill a variety of motivations that support players with self-soothing, community-building, creativity, and skill enhancement (Demetrovics et al., 2011; Shi, 2019, Gray 2012; Melodia et al., 2020; Yee, 2006). Therefore, the primary researcher examined the relationship between racialized distress, gaming motivations, and psychological health of GoC. This study addressed the following research questions and hypotheses:

RQ1: Are gaming motivations related to the psychological well-being of GoC?

RQ2: Do experiences of racialized distress increase gaming motivations for GoC?

RQ3: What is the relationship between racialized distress, gaming motivations and psychological well-being for POC.

H1: Gaming motivations will be associated with psychological well-being in GoC.

H2: Greater racialized stress will predict greater motivations to play video games for GoC.

H3: Gaming motivations will mediate the relationship between racialized stress and psychological well-being for GoC.

Methods

Participants

As shown in Table 1, the final data set for this study consisted of 644 participants. The average age of participants was 29 (*SD* =7.47, range 18 – 50). The racial diversity of this sample consisted of 42.2% Black, 23.9% Multiracial, 13% Asian, 11.8% Latinx, 9.3% Indigenous, and 7.5% Hawaiian participants. Participants self-identified their gender with 60.7% identifying as Men, followed by 32.9% Women, 2.8% Non-binary, 2% Two-spirited, and 1.1% of participants identifying as Agender.

This study's sample also included diverse expressions of affectional identity with gamers who identify as heterosexual accounting for 61% of the sample, followed by 11.3% of participants identifying bisexual, 7.8% as Gay/SGL, 5.6 % as asexual, 5.4 % as pansexual, 5.3% as lesbian, and 3.6% as queer. Participants also varied in their education level: 35.2% of this sample held bachelor's degrees, followed by 25.6% of participants who held a diploma or GED, 16.1% held a master's degree, and 7.5% of participants held a doctorate degree.

Respondents also indicated their weekly time spent gaming. Of participants, 43.5% played video games five to ten hours a week, 27.8% played more than 20 hours a week, and 27.6 % played one to five hours per week. On average, participants in this study played video games seven hours per week. Respondents also identified their gaming styles with 52.3% identifying as casual gamers, followed by 27.3% who identified as competitive players, 14.8% as professional players, and 5.4% of gamers who are undecided.

Procedures

After being approved by the institutional review board, participants were recruited through numerous online purposive and snowball sampling methods. The primary researcher created advertisements (e.g., flyers, video message, and email messaging) for this study that briefly explained the purpose and criteria for participation. The survey was developed using Qualtrics, and it was shared on social media websites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and Discord. To assist with reaching the target sample size, prospective participants were given a chance to enter a raffle drawing to win one $20 gift card.

To be eligible for this study, prospective participants had to meet the following criteria: (1) participants must be at least 18 years of age; (2) participants must play video games at least once a week; (3) participants must engage in online gameplay utilizing gaming consoles, personal computers, or mobile devices (e.g., PlayStation 4, Microsoft Xbox, Nintendo Switch, PC, Macbook, Android or iOS); (4) participants must identify as person of color, (i.e., Latinx, Asian, Native or Indigenous, Black, African American, Multi-racial, or belonging to the African diaspora); (5) participants must be living within the United States.

The initial number of surveys collected was 895. Cleaning the data consisted of removing surveys with 20% or more missing items (n = 200), cases with no demographic information (i.e., age, race, and location; n = 40), and cases outside of the United States (n = 11) (Griffin et al., 2021; Paul, 2022). The primary researcher also modified scoring procedures for the MOGQ and PWB measures due to missing items in the initial survey. The MOGQ had two missing items from the Coping subscale alongside one missing item

each from the Competition and Social subscales. One item belonging to the Personal Growth subscale of the PWB measure was missing from the survey. Participant scores on the MOGQ were summed, with higher scores in each subscale indicating greater motivation. To account for missing data, scores on the MOGQ and PWB were replaced by the group mean for each item.

Measures

Demographic Measure

The demographic measure consisted of 12 items including the following variables: age, education level, gender, affectional identity, geographic location, and racial identity. In addition, gaming-related variables consisted of preferred gaming system, game genre preferences, gaming style, online team play, and time spent gaming per week.

Index of Race-Related Stress (IRRS-B)

Utsey and Ponterotto (1996) developed the IRRS to measure daily occurrences of stress induced by racism and discrimination. For this study, racialized distress was assessed utilizing the general version of the Index of Race-Related Stress, Brief Form (IRRS-B; Utsey, 1999; Utsey et al., 2002). The IRRS-B is a shortened 22-item scale that measures participant perceptions of racialized oppression utilizing a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*This never happened to me)* to 4 (*this event happened, and I was extremely upset).* The IRRS-B contains three subscales: Individual racism (experiencing racism interpersonally, especially when White identity is privileged or regarded as superior to POC), Institutional racism (legal and political procedures that limit accessibility for POC persons), and Cultural racism (devaluing diverse cultural practices

and beliefs in favor of White cultural values) (Chapman-Hilliard et al., 2020; Utsey, 1999). Items from each IRRS-B subscale are summed with a total score indicating a greater amount of racialized stress. For this study, the primary researcher modified each item to reflect general events that POC may encounter in contrast to just Black persons (Utsey et al., 2002).

The IRRS-B has also demonstrated acceptable convergent and criterion validity, with Black Americans indicating higher scores in contrast to White Americans on Cultural Racism, M (SD) = 28.96 (7.19) and 13.35 (10.66), $F(1, 268) = 108.38$, $p < .001$; Institutional Racism, M (SD) = 10.23 (5.90) and 6.00 (6.24), $F(1, 268) = 13.14$, $p < .001$; Individual Racism, M (SD) = 13.16 (6.49) and 5.87 (5.13), $F(1, 268) = 33.32$, $p < .001$. The IRRS-B has also demonstrated concurrent validity with positive correlations between the Individual and Cultural racism subscales, the Perceived Stress Scale and the Revised Racism and Life Experience Scale (Cohen et al., 1983; Harrell,1995).

The IRRS-B has demonstrated good reliability and comparison validity. In a sample of 239 African Americans and 25 White Americans as a sub-sample, Cronbach's alpha scores for the three subscales were Institutional (.88), Cultural (.90), and Individual (.74), respectively (Utsey,1999). Shell et al. (2022) conducted a study sampling 252 Black mental health professionals to which the IRRS-B demonstrated good reliability with Cronbach alpha scores for each subscale: Institutional (.88), Cultural (.90), and Individual (.74). For this study, the IRRS-B produced favorable Cronbach alpha scores for each subscale: Cultural (.92), Institutional (.83), and Individual (.84).

Motives for Online Gaming Questionnaire (MOGQ)

Video game motivations was assessed using the Motives for Online Gaming Questionnaire (MOGQ; Demetrovics et al., 2011). The MOGQ comprises 27 items utilizing a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never/never*) to 5 (*always/always*). The MOGQ measures unique gaming motivations across seven subscales, which include: Escape (circumventing physical-world problems), Skill development (enhancing coordination, concentration, and gaming ability), Fantasy (a desire to have experiences that are not attainable in the physical world), Coping (improvement of mental state), Social (connecting with others and playing games together), Recreation (embracing the relaxing aspects of fun and play), and Competition (a sense of accomplishment from beating virtual adversaries).

Demetrovics' and colleagues (2011) initial study included 3818 participants, with MOGQ demonstrating suitable Cronbach's alpha scores for each subscale: Social (.76), Escape (.78), Competition (.80), Skill development (.84), Recreation (.85), Fantasy (.89), and Coping (.91). Further, Demetrovics et al. (2011) conducted a confirmatory factor analysis in which the MOGQ produced a suitable model fit for content validity ($\chi 2$ = 1909.0, df = 299, p = .107; CFI = 0.939; TLI = 0.928; RMSEA = 0.052 [0.049 – 0.054]; Cfit = 0.107; SRMR = 0.046) (Ballabio et al., 2017; Demetrovics et al., 2011; Melodia et al., 2018). For this study, the MOGQ produced low to suitable Cronbach alpha scores for the subscales: Social (.63), Escape (.60,) Coping (.54), Competition (.73), Skill Development, (.77), Fantasy (.69), and Recreation (.73).

Psychological Well-Being (PWB)

To measure psychological well-being, the primary researcher used the Psychological Well-Being scale (PWB; Ryff, 1989). The PWB consists of 42 items utilizing a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 7 (*strongly disagree*). The PWB is designed to measure six dimensions of psychological health: Meaningful relationships, Autonomy, Environmental mastery, Personal growth, Life purpose, and Self-acceptance (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). After reverse scoring for select items, responses are totaled for each subscale, with higher scores indicating greater psychological health within the six domains.

The 42-item PWB scale demonstrated suitable reliability across several studies examining psychological health in culturally diverse groups. For example, in a sample of 145 Iranian students, Bayani et al. (2008) reported reliability coefficients for the PWB as follows: Positive relationships (.77), Environmental mastery (.77), Personal growth (.78), Life purpose (.70), Autonomy (.78), and Self-acceptance (.71). The PWB has also demonstrated suitable construct validity within a sample of 1179 older women living in the UK (Abbott et al., 2006). For this study, the subscales of the PWB failed to reach suitable Cronbach alpha scores over .70. Subscale alpha scores ranged from .58 to .64. Therefore, this study used mean total scores for the PWB score. Cronbach alpha score of the PWB scale was .79.

Results

Respondent data were cleaned and examined using SPSS. Preliminary analyses were conducted to confirm no violation of assumptions of normality, independence, and linearity (Field, 2017). Descriptive statistics were used to examine correlative properties

of demographic variables (e.g., race, gender, education level, and affectional identity), gaming variables (e.g., time spent gaming, gaming style, and online team play with others), and the primary outcome variable PWB (see Table 2). Bivariate analyses found statistically significant correlations between PWB and four demographic variables: race, $r = .28$, $p < .001$; education, $r = .80$, $p < .05$; online team play, $r = .13$, $p < .001$; and gaming style $r = -.13$, $p < .05$. Dummy variables were created for the categorical variable of race and gaming style before conducting analyses. For this study and the research questions posed, racial identity was the selected covariate. Hayes PROCESS model for mediation was used to test the interplay between racialized distress at the cultural, individual, and institutional level with gaming motives and PWB (Demetrovics et al., 2011; Hayes, 2021; Ryff, 1989 Utsey & Ponterotto, 1996; Utsey, 2002).

To test the first hypothesis, bivariate correlations were used to detect the strength and relationship of gaming motivations with PWB (see Table 3). Based on Cohen's (1998) work on effect sizes, the correlation coefficients revealed that there was a marginal negative relationship between gaming motivations for Competition ($r = -.10$, $p = .01$) and Fantasy ($r = -.14$, $p = .0001$) with PWB. In other words, lower competition and fantasy gaming motives were associated with higher PWB. Additionally, results demonstrated a positive relationship between gaming motivations for Coping ($r = .10$, $p = .010$) and Recreation ($r = .45$, $p = .001$) with PWB. Stronger coping and recreation motives were associated with greater PWB in participants. Thus, these results support the first hypothesis that there is a relationship between gaming motivations, specifically Competition, Coping, Fantasy, and Recreation, and PWB. Notably, the strongest relationship was found for the Recreation gaming motive.

To test research question two, partial correlations were used to examine the relationship between racialized distress and gaming motivations while controlling for racial identity. Results indicated numerous associations between forms of racism and gaming motivations. First, cultural racism was correlated positively with gaming motivations for Escape (r = .09, p = .03), Coping (r = .08, p = .04), and Recreation (r = .19, p < .001). Correlation results suggest that greater exposure to cultural racism increases gaming motivations to detach from the immediate physical realities, soothe stress, and have uninhibited fun through gameplay online for GoC. Results also indicated a negative association between cultural racism and motivations for Competition (r = -.09, p = .02), suggesting greater exposure to cultural racism decreased a desire for competition for GoC.

Partial correlation results also indicated associations between Institutional racism and six gaming motives: Social (r = .14, p = .001), Escape (r = .16, p = .001), Competition (r = .12, p = .01), Coping (r = .15, p = .002), Skill development (r = .13, p = .001), and Fantasy (r = .19, p = .001). Results suggest that increased exposure to Institutional racism increases gaming motivations to connect with others, engage in challenging circumstances, detach from the immediate environment, mend distress, develop gaming skills, and immerse into their virtual realities for GoC. Lastly, the relationship between Individual racism and gaming motivations produced a small negative association with motivations for Escape (r = -.08, p = .03) and a slight positive association with motivations for Coping (r = .12, p = .003). Results suggest that GoC who experience individual racism have greater motives to soothe stress and less desire to detach through gameplay. Results provide support for hypothesis two, which maintained

that greater exposure to racialized distress increases motivations for online video gameplay.

To test hypothesis three, the Haye's PROCESS model for mediation was used (Hayes, 2021). The first mediation model examined the interplay of Cultural racism, gaming motives, and PWB when controlling for race. Cultural racism was a significant predictor of gaming motivations: Competition (b = -.11, 95% CI [-.017, -.002], p = .04), Escape (b = -.90, 95% CI [.-102, -.005] p =.03), Fantasy (b = -.22, 95% CI [-.169, -.069] p =.000), Skill development (b = .13, 95% CI [.024, .116] p =.002) and Recreation (b = .43, 95% CI [.180, .261] p = .000). Cultural racism did not predict motivating factors for being social and coping.

Table 4 shows the regression results displayed in Figure 1. The mediation model with Cultural racism, seven gaming motivations, and PWB explained about 32% of the sample variance, R^2 = .32, F (6, 580) = 21.07, p < .001. Results also revealed that Cultural racism had a significant indirect effect on PWB through motivations for recreational gaming (b =.085, 95% CI [.050, .112], p < .001). The total effect for this model also indicated significance (b =.009, 95% CI [.006, .012], p < .001). Furthermore, the direct effect of cultural racism on PWB in the presence of all seven gaming motivations indicated significance (b=.006, SE = .001, p < .001). Findings suggest a partial mediation between Cultural racism, gaming motives for recreation, and PWB.

Table 5 displays the regression results displayed in Figure 2. The mediation model for Institutional Racism with gaming motives and PWB, accounted for 30% (R^2 =.30, F (13, 593) = 19.76) of variance. Results indicate significant pathways from Institutional racism through gaming motives for Coping (b =.09, 95% CI [.001, .107], p

= .04), Skill development (*b* = .10, 95% CI [.011, .103], *p* = .01), Competition (*b* =-.10, 95% CI [-.091, -.008], *p* = .01), Fantasy (*b* = -.22, 95% CI [-.168, -.068], *p* =.000), Recreation (*b* = .46, 95% CI [.194, .273], *p* = .000), and Escape (*b* = -.09, 95% CI [-.098, -.001], *p* = .04) to PWB. However, the mediation model's total, direct, and indirect effects failed to reach significance, indicating no mediating relationship.

Table 6 shows the regression results for Figure 3. The mediation model with Individual racism, gaming motivations, and PWB explained R^2 =.30 of the sample variance *F* (13, 579) = 19.79, *p* < .001. Results indicate that Individual racism had a significant interaction with PWB through gaming motivations for Fantasy (*b* = -.22, 95% CI [-.170, -.069], *p* = .000), Recreation (*b* = .47, 95% CI [.199, .279], *p* = .000) , Skill Development (*b* = .11, 95% CI [.014, .106], *p* = .010), and Competition (*b* = -.11, 95% CI [-.095, -.0117], *p* = .012).

Results also indicated a significant pathway from Individual racism to gaming motives for Coping (*b* = .12, 95% CI [.005, .027], *p* = .042) and Escape (*b* = -.11, 95% CI [.001, .025], *p* = .030). However, the mediation model with Individual racism, gaming motivations, and PWB failed to reach statistically significant total, indirect, and direct effects. Findings from the mediation model demonstrating that recreational gaming motives mediates the relationship between exposure to Cultural racism and PWB provides partial evidence in support of hypothesis three. Results and implications for counseling research are discussed in the subsequent section.

Discussion

Race-related distress can be traumatic, with issues mirroring symptoms of PTSD. However, the APA has not officially recognized the impact of racism as a form of trauma

that increases susceptibility to the development of PTSD. Counseling and trauma researchers have elucidated how incidents of oppression, racism, and discrimination are potentially traumatic for POC (Carter, 2007; Carter et al., 2020; Cénat, 2022; Martin, 2022; Utsey et al., 2002; Williams et al., 2018b). With a lack of recognition of the relationship between race-related stress and the development of PTSD by governing mental health organizations, this study provided more awareness of how racialized distress impacts the wellness of POC.

This study was among the first in counseling scholarship to examine links between racialized distress and the psychological health of gamers of color. As results indicated, this study not only provided further evidence for considering the gravity of race-based stressors on the health of racially minoritized groups but also how said groups mitigate psycho-emotional harm through creative strategies such as video gameplay.

Initial conceptualizations of video games and psychological health asserted that prolonged gameplay increased problematic cognitive and behavioral patterns for users (APA, 2010; 2013). Several studies have demonstrated that video games may heighten aggression and discomfort with prosocial skills like emotional awareness (Anderson & Dill, 2000; You et al., 2015). Psychological indications of distress and numbing strategies may also be facilitated through video gameplay. Conversely, there is a marginal body of evidence that supports identifiable gaming practices that are distinctly problematic and warrant a diagnosis of IGD (APA, 2013; Ferguson, 2011). With the pervasiveness of video game usage, and the dissonance of what constitutes pathological gaming, the counseling field benefits from increasing understanding of video game technology (Cade & Gates, 2017).

This study also extended the statistical evidence base for recognizing how motivating factors relate to engagement with video games and how this engagement relates to psychological health of players. As the first hypothesis asserted, there were several significant associations between gaming motivations and PWB. Bivariate correlations revealed that the relationship between gaming motivations and PWB may be complex for GoC. For example, gaming motives for fantasy were correlated negatively with PWB. Fantasy motivations describe embracing a new identity or engaging in unattainable activities in the virtual world. Within this study, GoC reported being subjected to micro and macro level aggressions that relate to their marginalized identities (Carter, 2007; Meyers, 2003; Utsey & Ponterotto, 1996). Exposure to racism may increase the likelihood and desire for GoC to immerse themselves in an environment where they have more agency and power over their experience (Shi et al., 2019; Medina, 2021). This immersion is associated with lower PWB.

Gaming motivations for competition also correlated negatively correlated with PWB. The negative relationship between Gaming motives for competition and PWB may relate to the gaming habits of participants. As noted in Table 1, 52% of participants identified as casual players, 27% identified as competitive, and nearly 15% as professional players. Former studies have found motivations for competition to be a weaker mediating factor for problematic gameplay and that recreational players are typically less motivated to play games for achievement (Bányai et al., 2019; Demetrovics et al., 2011; Király et al., 2014).

Results also indicated that gaming motivations for recreation and coping were associated positively with PWB. Recreational motives denote using gaming to relax

while coping motives relate to managing and lessening stress (Demetrovics et al., 2011). For GoC, motivations for recreation and coping reflect previous studies that concluded that diverse gamers play video games for enjoyment and resist distress instead of seeking achievement through competition. (Gray, 2012; Richards & Gray, 2018). Overall results from the first hypothesis shed light on ways that video game motives relate to the psychological health of video game players. Particularly, for gamers of color, playing video games for fun has positive benefits for their well-being.

The second hypothesis stated that experiences of racism would predict motivations for gaming. Findings indicated a negative association between cultural racism and gaming motives for being social, competition, and skill development. Thus, more exposure to Cultural racism may decrease motivations to interact, compete with others, and enhance gaming skills for GoC. The negative relationship between Cultural racism and gaming motives for being social and competitive may link to the sense of isolation that racialized distress may foster (Carter, 2005; Jordan, 2018). GoC face racialized distress which is associated with decreased self-esteem, motivation, and mental functioning (Liang & Fassinger, 2008; Reynolds et al., 2010; Utsey & Ponterotto, 1996). Moreover, learning occurs in connection with others, meaning competition and learning new skills may require a higher degree of functioning and social engagement for players (Banks, 2006; Jordan, 2018).

Results from hypothesis two broaden what counseling research understands about the reaching impact of racism which permeates physical and virtual boundaries. First, cultural forms of racism hinder opportunities to connect and decreases the desire to learn. Second, this study is among the first in counseling scholarship to demonstrate how video

games may be used to support PWB, providing potential methods for clinical and educational use. Third, this study also answered the call from counseling researchers to examine the usefulness of video gameplay as a promoter of beneficial outcomes and clinical interventions (Ceranoglu,2010). As such, results provide counselors working with video game players of color considerations for understanding how motivations for gameplay may shift or enhance their psychological health.

Mediation analyses were conducted to test hypothesis three to understand the relationship between racialized distress, motivations for gameplay, and PWB. As shown in Figure 1, Cultural racism predicted gaming motivations for escape, fantasy, recreation, competition, coping, social, and skill development when controlling for race. Additionally, Cultural racism had a significant indirect effect on PWB through gaming motivations for recreation. This means that GoC who are exposed to sociocultural messages that their racial identities are less valuable than whiteness, were more motivated to escape their stress, play for fun, compete with others, build relationships, develop their skills, to heal and circumvent discomfort. Moreover, as GoC were exposed to Cultural racism they were motivated to play video games for fun to support their psychological wellness. Mediation results also highlight how embedded cultural racism is within our physio-virtual realities (Gray, 2012; Nakamura, 2002). Exposure to Cultural racism may also connect to the desire to engage in fun video gameplay to soothe distress (Rogers et al., 2017).

The mediation model for Institutional racism, gaming motives, and PWB (Figure 2) revealed significant pathways from Institutional racism to gaming motives for coping, competition, escape, and fantasy. However, this model did not reach total, direct, or

indirect significance. Similarly, as shown in Figure 3, Individual racism predicted gaming motivations for coping and escapism to support psychological health; however, the mediation model failed to reach statistical significance for direct, indirect, and total effects. The lack of statistical significance for the mediation model with Institutional racism, gaming motives, and PWB may relate to the likelihood of exposure to more blatant acts of systemic racism for PoC measured by the IRRS-B (Utsey et al., 2002). While African Americans report greater exposure to Institutional and Individual racism, criteria for this measure may not reflect the experiences of diverse groups of POC represented in this sample.

This study extends what is known about the interrelatedness of exposure to racism, discrimination, and video gameplay. Results suggest that greater racialized distress motivates GoC to adopt diverse coping strategies that involve immersion and escapism from stressors through video gameplay. Findings are notable, as scholars have recognized the potential of race-related stress to weaken coping strategies for culturally diverse groups (Harrell, 2000). Results of this study also demonstrated how video games and recreational play may be tools for lessening ongoing race-related distress,

Counseling professionals have asserted that video games evolve our understanding of the benefits of recreational play and its clinical applicability (Adal, 2013). Findings from this study suggest that GoC heal from microaggressions and discrimination by immersing themselves in a world that is fun and removed from oppression. As GoC engage in video gameplay, it supports coping with racialized distress and their PWB. This study also increased the evidence base for the relationship between

coping from stress and video gameplay by demonstrating that recreational gaming supports psychological health.

Video games provide GoC with several benefits that motivate players to collaborate, share knowledge, and increase their sense of cultural belonging to cope during challenging times (Gray, 2012; McDermont et al., 2022; Przybylski et al., 2010; Shaw, 2012). This study contributed to the mounting body of evidence showcasing how GoC contending with racial and ethnic discrimination adopt innovative methods for liberation. Additionally, this study is among the first in counseling scholarship that examines how video game technology may mitigate racialized distress for GoC. The potential of video games as treatment tools for addressing mental and traumatic distress at individual and collective levels is expanding. For example, counseling professionals have used video games as clinical tools to explore presenting concerns with clients seeking career and family therapy (Jordan, 2014; Rochat & Armengol, 2020),

The study also demonstrated how video games might assist with decreasing traumatic stress within the field of counseling. Findings reflect psychological research demonstrating that veterans have reported increased engagement with recreational video games that increased social connection and lessened trauma symptomology by providing opportunities to process distressing incidents (Carras et al., 2018; Elliot et al., 2015; Holmes et al., 2010). Aligned with results of this study, veterans and persons with PTSD reported that video games assisted with weakening trauma-related stress (Grant et al., 2018). Additionally, a large survey conducted by Barr and Copeland-Stewart (2022) found that video game players perceived gameplay to be beneficial to their well-being during moments of collective trauma such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

In a large self-report survey, increased exposure to discrimination was positively linked with dissociation, while active coping strategies decreased dissociative symptoms (Polanco-Roman et al., 2016). In a meta-analysis, Wang and Cheng (2022) found a strong moderating effect for escapism in individualistic cultures in comparison to collectivist cultures, this study's results are important because they highlight links between dissociative symptoms and how they may relate to racism and the psychological wellness of GoC (APA, 2013; Ballbio et al., 2017).

Conclusions from this study also shed light on innovative methods that culturally diverse groups use to increase their psychological health. However, the strong statistical power of this study combined with the many small associations suggest that results should be interpreted carefully. Altogether, findings from this study substantiate the need to further examine and address the ongoing encounters of racism that may be traumatic and disempowering for GoC (Carter, 2005; Williams et al., 2018a; Utsey et al., 2002).

Findings also provide further support for the need to integrate racialized forms of distress within the clinical and scholarly understanding of trauma within the counseling field. Lastly, with competing explanations for the psychopathology of gaming, this study was vital for deepening the counseling professions understanding of how video games impact human health.

Limitations

This study faced several limitations. First, the data collection for this study is based on self-reported information, which may challenge the generalizability of findings. During the data cleaning process, it was apparent that bots contributed to a portion of the submitted surveys (that data was removed). While this study used the suggested

precautions to address the issue of bots, it is crucial to recognize how some data may still reflect bots imitating actual participants (Griffin et al., 2021; Paul, 2022).

An additional limitation is that several items from the MOGQ and PWB were left out of the initial survey. Thus, the MOGQ subscales were not used as the initial designer intended (Demetrovics et al., 2011). Lower alpha scores may also be related to fewer items on subscales, particularly for the MOGQ (Cohen, 1988).

Another limitation involves the psychometric properties of Ryff's (1989) PWB scale. Unfortunately, the subscales for PWB demonstrated unsuitable Cronbach alpha scores. As a result, the total of mean scores of all items for the PWB scale were used to measure psychological health. Thus, scoring procedures did not reflect the multidimensional factors related to psychological well-being as the primary investigator intended.

Ryff's (1989) PWB constructs may not reflect the factors relevant to understanding the well-being of gamers and people of color. Lower internal consistency scores also echo findings from social scientists who examined PWB in Black, Latinx, and Indigenous communities (Springer & Hauser, 2006; Yoon et al., 2019). Lower alpha scores corroborate perspectives arguing that the 42-item PWB measure may be unsuitable for research with racially diverse persons (Abbot et al., 2010; Dykema, 2017). Similarly, while the MOGQ has been validated with homogenous groups (Chinese, Italian, and Turkish) this study is one of the first to have a racially and ethnically diverse sample (Ballabio et al., 2017; Demetrovics et al., 2011; Evren et al., 2020; Marino et al.,2020; Wu et al., 2017). Such limitations have implications for counseling professionals and future research endeavors.

Implications for Counseling

Ethical counselors must extend their awareness of multicultural and social justice related issues (ACA; 2014; Ratts et al., 2016; Sing et al., 2020). Understanding how racialized distress and trauma affect the resilience of diverse persons seeking therapy is key for counseling professionals and educators (Cables, 2022; Martin, 2022). This study also amplifies underexplored topics on gaming and mental health in counseling. Counselors should assess the psychological, interpersonal, and cultural needs of clients who play video games. Counselors may consider using tools like the MOGQ to assess gaming motivations for therapeutic discussions and interventions (Demetrovics et al., 2011).

Understanding how lived experiences and exposure to oppression relate to psychological health is also paramount for counselors treating marginalized gamers. Clinicians will also benefit from understanding how client gaming motivations relate to AFK (away from keyboard) stress (Cade & Gates, 2017), which may present opportunities to effectively conceptualize and respond to presenting challenges (Rochat & Armengol, 2020). Counselors are also encouraged to understand gaming technology and lore which may support the therapeutic alliance and creative approaches for treatment (Cade & Gates, 2017; Dini, 2012).

Future Research

Counseling research could benefit from further exploring the connection between psychological wellness and time spent gaming, particularly around features described as problematic gaming (APA, 2013). The sample for this study was comprised of GoC within the United States. With video games being a global phenomenon, future

counseling scholarship could investigate psychological well-being in culturally diverse countries. Another research effort may be to explore more qualitative understandings of how gaming relates to the perceived psychological health of gamers, especially those who are marginalized. Additionally, future counseling research could benefit from further examination of the applicability of the PWB scale with culturally diverse groups.

This dissertation also presents opportunities to expand scholarship on gaming science in counseling. Counseling researchers may consider exploring how video games may address trauma symptomology by using measures such as the Trauma Symptoms of Discrimination Scale (TSDS), that specifically qualifies racial trauma (Elliot et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2018a). Counselor educators may also consider conducting case and experiential studies to establish the usefulness of video gameplay to decrease mental distress and increase engagement in counseling courses. Lastly, researchers may consider exploring how acts of cyber-racism that occur within gaming spaces relate to physical and virtual perceptions of PWB (Green et al., 2023).

Conclusion

This study investigated the relationship between racism experiences, gaming motivations and psychological health. Correlations revealed that gaming motivations, namely Fantasy, Coping, Competition, and Recreation, are associated with better PWB for GoC. Additionally, this study aimed to provide evidence for motivations for GoC to play after experiencing increased racialized distress. Results reveal a small relationship between racialized distress and motivations for online gaming. Lastly, the relationship between racialized distress and PWB was significant and accounted for a large portion of the variance in the presence of gaming motivations.

Findings suggest that video games may be used for various purposes across diverse groups. It is important to contextualize the experience of the gamers to better understand why they use video games. Future research efforts are necessary to continue developing understanding of how video gameplay relates to distress within the physio-virtual world.

Study 2:

An Interpretive Analysis of Black Queer Gamers and Connection

Video games have become the most widely used form of global entertainment (Entertainment Software Association, 2015). A growing body of evidence highlights the pervasiveness of video games and culturally diverse people engaging in gameplay. For example, around 72% of American teenagers in the United States engage in daily video gameplay, while the average age of gamers is 35 years old (ESA, 2015). The broad reach of video games also has prominence for socially minoritized groups. For instance, despite the lack of sound representation in gaming design, African Americans and women are the fastest growing populations in gaming culture (ESA, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2015; Richard & Gray, 2018). These findings suggest that video games are a ubiquitous feature of life across diverse groups in society.

While video gameplay has become a common phenomenon, gaming culture and design centers the hegemonic White male identity, while erasing or tokenizing people of color (POC), affectional minorities, and women (Gray, 2012; Richard & Gray, 2018; Shaw, 2012). Minoritized gamers report a lack of representation, reflecting real-world attitudes that permeate into virtual spaces (Gray, 2012, 2016; Medina, 2021; Richard & Gray, 2018). Minoritized gamers are also subjected to disempowering tactics such as racist verbal assaults, linguistic profiling when seeking teammates, sexist harassment, and in-game humiliation (Gray, 2012, 2017, 2018; Medina, 2021; Nakamura, 2002).

Gaming technology scholars have noted the lack of research exploring the extent and impact of violence aimed at non-hegemonic groups in virtual spaces (Gray, 2014, 2016; Ortiz, 2019; Medina, 2021). The brunt of digitized violence can intersect, increasing the likelihood of psycho-emotional harm aimed at queer men and women of color (Richards & Gray, 2018; Medina, 2021). Further, while male gamers of color are often subjected to racist rhetoric online, Black men negotiate their level of resistance and engagement based on their privileged and disempowered identities (Gray, 2016; Ortiz, 2019). To extend what is known about identity and gaming spaces, the primary researcher will explore how Black affectional minority men experience connection and disconnection within their physical, virtual, or physio-virtual environments.

Oppressive Disconnection

Oppression and community ostracization negatively predict the well-being of affectional minorities. In a meta-analysis, King et al. (2008) found that affectional minorities who experience ongoing stigmatization and discrimination are vulnerable to developing depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. Mental distress can be amplified when intersecting factors such as race and social class are considered. For example, contending with homophobia and racism simultaneously, the stigmatization of Black affectional minorities can be exacerbated by inequitable social status and structural barriers (Syzmanski & Gupta, 2009).

Black affectional minority men may also experience isolation, increased psychological distress, and lower self-esteem linked to ostracization from the

dominant, White and heterosexist society (DiPillo, 2009; Smith, 2013). Intersecting oppression is also associated with familial rejection, community violence, and diminished self-acceptance for Black affectional minority men (Arnold et al., 2014; Bowleg, 2013; Earnshaw et al., 2021; Syzmanski & Gupta, 2009). While evidence delineating how oppression may manifest in physio-virtual spaces is proliferating, minoritized gamers have reported that online communities may provide a reprieve from societal maltreatment (Gray, 2012; 2018; McGee & Wolfe, 1991; Medina, 2021; Ortiz, 2019; Nakamura, 2002).

Several qualitative studies have supported the benefits of online gaming to explore identities, connect with others, and curtail oppression that queer gamers of color contend with. In a qualitative study by Shaw (2012), queer and gender-diverse video game players sought community and belonging after dealing with online heterosexism and homophobia. In an ethnographic study, Gray (2017) highlighted the transgressive play of Black Lesbian gamers who expressed dealing with misogynoir, a distinct form of sexism and racism aimed at Black women. In a narrative study, male gamers of color reported being exposed to racist and homophobic trash talk that became a normalized experience while gaming (Ortiz, 2019; Medina, 2021). While there is a growing body of research highlighting the experiences of queer gamers of color navigating digital environments (Medina, 2021), there is a lack of research exploring the unique gaming experiences of Black queer men (BQM). Experiences of marginalization on and offline may lead BQM to seek connection through online means, which includes video gameplay.

Seeking Connection

Human beings thrive within interconnected networks of mutual engagement. Mutuality is a fundamental feature of cultivating meaningful relationships (Jordan, 1991; Jordan & Dooley, 2001). Miller and Stiver (1997) described mutuality as a shared activity in which all entities participate fully and authentically. Mutuality does not equate to reciprocity, sameness, or equality (Jordan,1991; 2018). However, mutuality entails being open to a relationship's impact, change, and growth. Cultivating mutuality supports connectedness, a process that increases interpersonal, affective and cognitive benefits (Frost & Meyer, 2012; Jordan, 2018).

Meaningful connections also support our sense of enjoyment and pleasure within relationships. Fun and zest bolster the ability to relax, experience enriching emotions, and resist societal barriers (Isen, 2003; Rook & Underwood; Spencer & Liang, 2009). Growth-fostering relationships also support vulnerable and authentic exchanges of empathy that increase our sense of belonging and community (Jordan & Dooley, 2001; Jordan, 1991; Lenz, 2014).

Affectional minorities have understood the importance of connectedness through innovative outlets to survive in society. For instance, affectional minorities have utilized the internet to establish online connections that were integral to their identity development, community-building, and skill acquisition (Harper et al.,2016; Kubicek, 2013). Connectedness is also noted as a valuable resource that supports belonging, identity affirmation, resistance to stigma, and

overall health for queer persons of color (Bowleg, 2013; Detrie & Lease, 2007; DiPillo, 2009; Yip et al., 2021). Moreover, scholars suggest that connectedness may foster relational healing and resilience for Black affectional minorities (Barry et al.,2018; Rose & Brown, 2022; Rowan et al., 2014).

Minoritized gamers have expressed that online gaming connections have increased their sense of safety, resilience, and liberation (Gray, 2012, Gray, 2017; Medina, 2021; Ortiz, 2019; Richard & Gray, 2018). However, identity development and community-building may be complex for Black affectionally minority men. BQM may face rejection from their families and communities, key factors that assist with social development (Arnold et al., 2014; Loiacano, 1989). BQM may seek belonging in the separate and distinct Black and LGBTQIA+ communities, while often being disregarded, invalidated, and subjected to homophobia, fetishization, and racism (DiPillo, 2009; Loiacano, 1989). Exposure to isolation and stigma may also be internalized further shifting developmental trajectories and the salience of identities for BQM (Bowleg, 2013). The experiences of isolation and oppression may relate to engagement with video games to find safety and community online.

Gamer identities and behaviors in virtual environments must be understood within the context of real-world or away from keyboard (AFK) experiences (Dunn & Guadagno, 2019; Gray, 2012; Russell, 2020; Shaw, 2010). Furthermore, digitized violence cannot be disconnected from the real-world identities of the gamer (Gray, 2012, 2017; Nakamura, 2002). Gaming connections may support resilience, the capacity to withstand oppression, and relational

disruptions. Altogether, the preceding literature underscores the need to explore the experiences of Black queer gamers exploring connection within gaming spaces. Thus, the primary investigator proposes the following research question:

How do Black Queer men experience aspects of connection and disconnection in online gaming communities?

This study also aligns with recent suggestions from counseling leadership to deepen our collective understanding of multicultural and social justice-related issues relevant to research and clinical practice (Ratts et al., 2016). Moreover, this study will conceptualize the gaming experiences of BQM through the lens of Relational Cultural theory (RCT). RCT is noted as an optimal approach for supporting multicultural, social justice, and decolonized approaches suited for collaborating with Black and affectional minorities in therapy (Rose & Brown, 2022; Comstock et al., 2008; Singh et al., 2020). This study also provides an opportunity for counseling professionals to explore how gaming technology connects to the experiences and relational health of BQM. Lastly, exploring interpersonal wellness within gaming environments may support a foundational understanding of our consciousness within immersive online platforms in the future.

Methodology

Relational Cultural Theory

The experiences of BQM will be conceptualized using the Relational Cultural theoretical (RCT) framework. RCT recognizes the interrelated nature of oppression and how it may diminish the human capacity to develop meaningful

relationships in society (Comstock et al., 2008; Walker, 2008). Jordan (2018) outlined key features of meaningful relationships known as the *five good things*: (1) zest, (2) authenticity, (3) clarity, (4) sense of worth, and (5) the sense to seek out other meaningful connections. The primary investigator posits that utilizing RCT to conceptualize the experiences of BQM who game may be helpful for counselors and counselor educators supporting diverse gamers in therapy.

From an RCT perspective, connection can be understood as the sense of being mutually engaged with others in a relationship (Genero et al., 1992; Jordan & Dooley, 2001). Connectedness catalyzes relational growth towards mutuality, which supports the capacity to bring one's genuine self and lived experiences into a relationship (Jordan, 1991; 2018). Mutuality also entails recognizing the importance of self-worth and empathy in relationships, which increases self-connection and deepens authenticity (Duffey & Somody, 2011; Jordan, 2018).

RCT situates the awareness of power and mutual empathy as crucial components of connectedness (Walker, 2004). Sharing power between the researcher and participants for this study involved sharing experiences. The process of sharing power entails honoring the cultural knowledge both parties provide to advance our understanding of connectedness within gaming mediums. As Black queer gamers establish connections in virtual communities, they may experience a deepening of their authentic self in the physical world.

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

Phenomenology focuses on how individuals experience a phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). IPA involves investigating experiences in detail by diligently

analyzing the convergence and divergence within the participant data. Exploring sameness and nuance enriches the participants' and researchers' knowledge and understanding of a particular phenomenon (Miller et al., 2018). These descriptions, or data, are retrieved, analyzed, individually reviewed in context, and interpreted through various epistemological methods (Smith et al., 2009).

The primary researcher developed emergent patterns, themes, or categories to reflect summaries of participants' individual and collective experiences (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). This process is a key distinction of IPA as a qualitative method, describing a phenomenon and how individuals collectively and uniquely experience it (Creswell, 2013).

Phenomenological inquiry is an optimal methodology for psychological research on human sexuality (Frost et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2009). For example, Harper et al. (2016) explored how affectional minority men and women experienced the use of the internet to develop their identities. Previous qualitative inquiries have utilized ethnography and narrative methodologies to explore gaming communities, virtual oppression, and resistance among gender-diverse Black and Latino gamers (Gray, 2012, 2018; Medina, 2021). There is a dearth of counseling literature exploring the gaming phenomena and Black Queer identity, which further justifies the selection of IPA for this study.

Participants

All participants self-identified as Black men. Participants also self-identified their affectional orientations as gay (n =5), queer (n =2), or bisexual (n =2). The mean age of contributors was 30 (SD =15.36) years old. Participants

lived in varying locations across the Midwest, Southeast, and Northeast regions of the United States. Participants were also asked to describe their gaming habits, preferred genres to play, and hours spent gaming (Table 7). The sample size for this study aligns with suggestions from leading IPA researchers who note the importance of in-depth experiences, meaning making, and the interpretation process that derives from a group of homogenous participants (Smith et al., 2009).

Data Collection

This study was approved by the university institutional review board prior to collecting data. The researcher used purposive criterion sampling during the initial recruitment phase to reach an optimal sample size for this study. First, the primary researcher shared flyers detailing a brief description of the study and criteria for prospective participants on various social media platforms (i.e., Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter). Second, the researcher posted information regarding this study on online gaming forums (i.e., Joyfreak, Pcgamer, and VGR). Lastly, the primary investigator employed snowball sampling by inviting participants to share flyers and information about this study with their social networks.

Data collection involved 5 demographic questions, individual semi-structured interviews, and the primary researcher's notes. An interview guide consisting of 11 primary and 11 probing questions was developed using the Relational Cultural framework. This interview guide was reviewed and refined with counselor education faculty members on the primary researchers committee. Interview questions were designed to explore the concepts of identity, connection,

and disconnection (Collins, 2002; Jordan, 2018; Lértora et al., 2021). Interview questions also focused on the dual nature of video gameplay and the lived experience of BQM who play. During their initial interview, the BQM were asked to share their definitions and experience of the interview questions posed. Participants were encouraged to share insights, memories, or additional questions. Participants were also asked to disregard questions that prompted psycho-emotional discomfort. Participant interview times ranged from 35 minutes to 65 minutes. All 9 of the contributors to this study received a $30 Amazon gift card for their participation.

Data Analysis

RCT and IPA pair to make a befitting methodology for exploring aspects of connectedness with BQM. After reviewing the relational-focused interview guide, the primary researcher implemented a seven-step process across two phases to analyze respondents' experiences. First, a semi-structured interview was conducted via Zoom with each participant. After each interview, the primary researcher listened to the audio recordings case by case, while completing initial notations of the participant narratives. Initial notes included highlighting participant words of interest, unexpected insights, frequent content, and additional questions to explore.

Second, audio recordings were uploaded to the secure software Sonix, where transcripts were developed and edited for accuracy. Third, each transcript was read and reread case by case. After each initial read-through of a transcript, the primary researcher reflected on the respondents' experience by creating

written and voice memos detailing initial thoughts, feelings, interpretations, and further questions. Fourth, priori codes were created using the RCT framework and the initial notes developed prior to the in-depth analyses. Fifth, the preliminary codebook was then uploaded to the software known as NVivo.

The second phase began with the sixth step, which involved developing and applying additional content codes to the data based on the primary investigators' interpretations (Miller et al., 2018). The primary researcher used the a priori codes and subordinate content codes to align with this study's conceptual framework, albeit the selected codes were notably the most frequently occurring. Seventh, quotes reflecting the selected codes were written with the researchers' interpretations. Afterward, each participant reviewed the selected quotes and interpretations to ensure that they aligned with their experience. Participants were then asked to select a pseudonym they wanted to use for this study.

The methodology for this study is consistent with suggestions proposed by Finlay (2009). Each interview was reviewed case by case and across cases afterward. In addition, excerpts from the data and themes were shared with participants to ensure their experience was reflected. The primary researcher also engaged in an ongoing reflexive process including activities like journaling and audio logging. The primary researcher maintains that these reflexivity strategies supported the trustworthiness of this study.

Trustworthiness

Participants were selected based on their capacity to provide rich perspectives of gaming, identity, and connection. Participants were also asked to

define and describe their unique experiences, which aligns with the interpersonal and phenomenological framework of this study (Finlay, 2009; Miller et al., 2018). Semi-structured interviews also involved fluid conversation to assist with the interpersonal connection between researcher and participant. This method bolstered the trust between the researcher and participants, which has led to a more profound expression of experiences.

Rapport and reflexivity were important aspects of this study. Reflexivity extends beyond self-identification within a community; reflexivity involves distinguishing between uniformity and authenticity within the research-participant relationship (Smith, 2009; Evans-Winters, 2019). The primary researcher engaged in multiple reflexive activities to support rigor and trustworthiness. For example, the primary researcher completed bi-weekly journal entries reflecting their thoughts, feelings, and responses to the participant experiences. Lastly, understanding cultural context lends itself to establishing rapport and the interpretive process which is valuable for the trustworthiness of qualitative research (Morrow, 2005). The investigator holds cultural and scholarly understanding of the research topic, which further supports the trustworthiness of this study.

Positionality

As the primary investigator, I presented several biases, assumptions, and hopes for prospective findings of this study. As a Black affectional minority, I have also experienced physical and digitized acts of violence that link to video gameplay habits. Admittedly, participants shared experiences that mirrored my

experience of navigating society. After each interview, reflection activities helped to further understand how I am influenced by and tethered to this work.

This study is intimately connected to my identity as a Black gay man, gamer, clinician, and researcher. Participants expressed never being asked questions related to their identities and gaming journey. Similarly, I had not thought about these concepts within my own lived experience. This process also assisted with better understanding my sense of connection, mutuality, community, and self-definition. While this study is professionally valuable, I am only beginning to recognize how personally valuable it may be for my identity as a Black Gay man.

I hold privilege as an educated, cisgender Black gay man. My organic connection to this community assisted with holding empathy and regard for participants' lived experiences. Additionally, community and connection are essential for a Black and queer communities (Bowleg, 2013). The primary researcher explored a concept with participants who share similar identities, increasing the likelihood of existing within the same community. This commonality may have influenced rapport and relational dynamics. To deny how privilege and social capital influence relational dynamics in communities of queer men, which includes the researcher, would be misaligned with phenomenological and relational cultural tenets. More importantly, building connections between the researcher and participants was integral to this study. I believe that cultivating relationships with participants enhanced their willingness to share their experience and knowledge. Furthermore, acknowledging the capacity for mutual

learning is a benefit, as developing knowledge of self and others may be an essential component of innovative research and collective healing (Evans-Winters, 2019).

Results

Employing the Relational Cultural framework, the subsequent sections highlight the priori and subordinate codes established from analyzing participant data. The final findings include three primary themes Disconnection, Connectedness, and Gaming Journey. The Disconnection theme had two subthemes: Oppression and Protective Disconnection. The second primary theme had one subtheme focused on Community. The third primary theme related to participants' journey playing video games had two subthemes: Party Members, and Gaming Influences).

Theme One - Disconnection

From an RCT perspective, disconnection is a primary source of human suffering (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Sources of disconnection may involve relational misunderstanding and ruptures, alongside bullying and communal ostracization (Jordan, 2018). Disconnection may also become chronic, increasing isolation and psychological harm, especially when considering sociocultural identities that face various forms of oppression (Comstock et al., 2008). The concept of disconnection is an overarching theme that describes how participants experienced relational development while facing isolation and the absence of meaningful connections (Walker, 2002).

Respondents were asked to share their conceptualizations and experiences of disconnection. As Lance explained, disconnection consists of **"**isolation, aloneness, out of sync or out of communication." Jade contributed to further understanding of disconnection by noting the lack of authenticity and emotional safety:

> When I think about disconnection, I think about downplaying who I am as a person. We no longer can hold each other accountable at the same time without being upset. We can no longer be vulnerable with one another."

Alongside emotional incongruence, participants noted how disconnection can be somewhat intuitive and inert, as Tre shared: "I think disconnection is when there's something internal that's being called or that's trying to call out and not being recognized. It's not finding purchase. It's not finding home anywhere.

Disconnection may limit key factors related to interpersonal and community development. Diverging experiences of disconnection highlighted more visceral challenges when seeking and sustaining connectedness. For example, Shelby illustrated that disconnection can feel like a lack of regard and mutuality: "disconnection, I would say, is lack of understanding. A lack of in some cases a lack of empathy." Jed further explained the emotional toll that disconnection may engender: "I would say it [disconnection] is disheartening. I am such a sociable person. I just want to make as many connections and maintain them as possible."

The experience of disconnection may also be infrequent due to a lack of present authentic relationships for some participants. As Masani described: "I really haven't had too many moments of disconnection. I mean, as a person of few friends, to me it's either genuine or it's not. And if it's genuine, then we still talk."

When reflecting on their experience of disconnection online, participants expressed dissent regarding their sense of physical and emotional safety. Some participants articulated how the space between online connections, in contrast to physical connections, can represent unknown or precarious interactions:

> For me, disconnection is super hard in a video game space compared to a real life one because I always have a distance. I have a lot more barriers to get to know me in when I'm gaming online, especially with strangers. I think it's the extra layer of anonymity. Anonymity that could happen on either side makes me more cautious with who I'm engaging with.

Video games and online platforms have often been described as problematic and divorced from emotional and cognitive stimulation (Ferguson, 2011; Guglielmucci et al., 2019). However, a disregard for the influence of video games misaligns with the experiences expressed by participants of this study. Jed described the potential of disconnection within gaming environments to foster emotional disturbance:

> I guess people that don't play video games would probably say no. But honestly, in my experience, I would say yes. Like I met some great people. And then at some point, there was a disconnect. I didn't think that online

> connections would feel just as real as in-person connections. But I felt that. So, there would be times like someone that I played with for years is like no longer online. Like, I'll never be able to see them again. That is disappointing and disheartening.

Oppression

Oppression elicits disconnection and mental distress. With AFK oppression being a primary source of disconnection and mental distress for marginalized communities, it is relevant for understanding the online experience of oppression for BQM. As such, respondents were asked to share their conceptualization and experience of oppression in their physio-virtual environments. All nine participants vividly expressed exposure to oppression within their lived experiences.

Respondents framed oppression within the context of power, exclusion, and confinement. As Jade noted: "oppression is anyone or anything that makes you feel like you're not enough or makes you feel that you aren't worthy." Converging perspectives also highlighted how oppression involves entities wielding power to disempower an individual or group based on specific characteristics. Lance stated: "oppression is the holding down or beating down of a group or an individual. The holding back or restricting or attacking a certain group of individuals, and usually for their identity."

Participants also shared diverging definitions that note the systemic features of oppression and its impact on a broader range of people. As Tre explained: "oppression is a system that seeks to suppress, stifle, or disconnect a

group of people or not even necessarily the people, but an aspect of these people, that they share. I think it's an exclusion or a systemic need to exclude to create what's in the center." Rex provided further nuance to the experience of oppression by recognizing how privilege connects to the capacity to oppress others: "oppression is using a power to punch down onto others that could be used in many different contexts. So, it's just being able to use a power from a place of privilege in a way to make others feel bad, who don't have that same privilege as you do."

It is critical to understand that AFK oppression can pose a seemingly normalized threat to the health of BQM. Masani shared a hurtful experience of being verbally assaulted while connecting with friends in their AFK environment: "I had a night hanging out with friends where we were attacked, and the F-word was shouted. I'm not going to say it's deserved, but it kind of comes with the territory. It's a possibility whenever you're out and being yourself."

Participants also reported the psycho-emotional and physical harm that being ostracized and exposed to violence can engender. The following statements from Jade and Tre recount the real danger posed by marginalization and oppression in AFK environments:

> My father kicked me out of my house at 15 years old because I was a gay boy. He said he had no son and all the other stuff. I've dealt with people who didn't want to deal with me anymore after I graduated because I was gay. I had people who didn't want me to come around their family members because I was Black, so oppression is a daily situation.

> I was walking home, and this group of guys started shouting something at me. I didn't even know it was directed to me until they got closer. And then it's like, you know, queer boy, f-slur. One of them attacks me. They pull out a knife. I wrestle the knife away. Another one hits me in the head. The one that I'm on top of regains the knife and slashes at me, and I just barely managed to deflect it and they eventually run away. I don't think they were expecting any sort of resistance.

Participants were asked if they experienced oppression within online gaming environments. While some participants reported experiencing racist and homophobic rhetoric while gaming online, BQM expressed diverging perspectives between virtual and physical acts of violence. Other participants recognized that online environments may be rife with bigotry and negativity.

Other participants indicated that there's a distinction between exposure to physical acts of oppression and harm within virtual environments. Jade and Hunter provided insight into their views of oppression in online gaming environments:

> I've seen on social media and as an online gamer, the bullying and all that, which we all I'm sure have experienced. I try not to subject myself to dealing with a lot of people outside of my bubble or a lot of people that don't have those connections with because those situations I've seen played out can be stress inducing, number one. Number two, it can make you feel bad about yourself and all kinds of things.

I often only engage in online communities that I am free to leave without repercussion. I'm like called slurs all the time. Like literally I tell people, on Overwatch, I'll get called a slur on at least a bi-weekly basis. But when that happens, I block and move on with my life. So, I don't think I have been in a position where I can say I've been oppressed.

Racial and affectional minorities may employ unique and creative strategies to resist oppression. Some participants expressed ongoing resistance to hatred and toxicity occurring in their inhabited environments. As Mizu shared, the recognition and acceptance of self in relation to society may even enhance the sense of strength and uniqueness:

> If I were obviously if I were given the opportunity to not be oppressed, I wouldn't want to do it. But if I were given the opportunity to not be a part of, this oppressed community [Black and queer], I wouldn't do it. It builds character and no, it doesn't feel good. Like nobody wants to be oppressed. But there's something very unique about it.

Protective Disconnection

All nine participants discussed the multilayered nature of disconnection. Aligned with RCT, Protective Disconnection involves various strategies that BQM adopted to mitigate stigma and toxicity within their inhabited physio-virtual environments. Jed's experience reflects how resistance is linked to the practice of agency in online environments:

> I was really big into Call of Duty, so that came with the added effect of dealing with that community, which was not the best. It's also important

> for me to be able to navigate those spaces. I will make sure I can protect myself, like mute everybody when I start the game because I don't want to deal with any of that nonsense.

Jed's expression also reflects how resistance is linked to the practice of agency to preserve their gaming experience. Respondents also discussed how protective disconnection may serve as a buffer against stigma and psycho-emotional disturbance. In a humorous exchange that indicates acceptance and a refusal to allow disempowerment, Masani expressed how disconnection serves to recognize and invalidate emotional disturbances:

> I can block a lot of things out when I want to, unless I'm choosing violence. I don't entertain it. I mean, you can call me the F word; you can call me the N word. You can call me a homo. You can say whatever not heard before. Congratulations. Moving on.

Mizu also recognized the challenges of navigating the world with doubly marginalized identities: "It just feels so dangerous to exist sometimes, as a black person, as a queer person, and don't let you be Black, happy, and queer. People hate that." While recognizing the obstacles to living fully and authentically, Mizu continued by noting how disconnection can be beneficial for developing bonds and a sense of solace: "But disconnecting can also be a very positive thing too, that could be disconnecting from the real world to play games online or to connect with people who make you feel good and make you feel safe."

Protective disconnection may also involve severing unhelpful bonds. This disconnection strategy may allow for relational clarity that supports resistance to

socioemotional disturbances while honoring self-connection. Rex expressed their distinct experience of protective disconnection strategies:

> You realize it's [a relationship] no longer a healthy situation or a healthy experience to maintain. So, you just decide to cut it off, like put yourself first, cut off this person, so that it no longer brings negativity around you. If you're in a situation and you don't walk away feeling good, why are you around this person?

Some respondents also describe disconnection as a natural process throughout human development. While some disconnection may feel hurtful, perceiving disconnection as a naturally occurring milestone can be intuitive and protective, as Mizu shared:

> The abrupt ones [disconnections] tend to feel a little different. Whether in gaming and in real life. I feel like when there's a gradual disconnect, it's a little bit easier to process because sometimes you see it coming and you're able to prepare yourself for it. It's easier to take care of yourself when it's happening because you can kind of see it coming.

Protective disconnection may also provide opportunities to adapt to and accept differences in relational movement. Additionally, shifts in relational movement can be understood as a developmental process rather than a lack of connectedness, according to Hunter:

> I guess disconnection doesn't always need to be a bad thing. Like one of my best friends, we were best friends in high school, and we never had a bad moment, but just like through life moving in different directions, we

> don't talk as much as we used to. And that can be a form of disconnection because we went from texting every other day to our six-monthly check-in, just to make sure we're all doing okay. And we still love each other.

Disconnection may stem from multiple sources of interpersonal and societal violation. Humiliation, bullying, and violence are sources of disconnection that threaten the health of human beings. However, disconnection may be necessary for minoritized groups. As participants in this study shared, disconnecting forces like oppression may be harmful so disconnection may also be insulating. Findings note that video games allow for opportunities to disconnect from stress and to connect with others.

Theme Two - Connectedness

Connectedness describes the interrelated existence between entities and the multidimensional environments which they exist in. Connectedness also extends to individuals' awareness of their inner world and external communities (Jordan, 1991). Connectedness is a vital aspect of living that promotes increased vitality, engagement, worth, and a desire for further connection. As Tre described, connectedness can be an intuitive process of seeking and establishing authentic relationships with others: "connection is like a calling of something internal to something internal in another source or body." Masani shared a converging perspective of how safe connections are intuitively perceived before establishing a bond: "A connection is a vibe. That's it. It's a vibe. I'm connecting without ill intention behind it."

Connectedness is also possible in multiple contexts where all parties are committed to shaping their conjoined experience. Jed shared: “connection can be any sort of bond that you can create, whether it’s between people, whether it’s physical, whether it’s online, any type of bond that you can develop and steer into different ways depending on how you feel.” Connectedness in physio-virtual environments may also involve immersive and zestful collaboration that centers mutual respect and engagement, as Mizu and Shelby shared:

> It’s [connection] is when you feel happiest. When you’re interacting with other people, you begin to lose sense of time. It means there’s something about what’s happening right now that’s allowing me to forget about reality.

Connection is just people you can get along with. There’s not a lot of friction when we’re together and they’re not like a super combative relationship. They know how to get along and they don’t need to be on any weird power trip. I’d say they have to be positive towards each other. I don’t want to be on a team where we make fun of each other and mock each other with hostile intention. If you mess up, you mess up. But, at the end of the day, it's us versus them.

Mutual connections support further relational movement towards meaningful bonds with others. Connections allow for aspects of self to be understood within context, which may be distinctly important for marginalized groups often stereotyped by those in power (Duffy et al., 2009; Walker, 2008). Lance described how initial connections grew into relational and communal support:

> Typically, I guess, the stereotype of gamers is they are introverted. I can agree with that. Just being able to find people with those interests and just being able to have that connection. A couple of people that I'm friends with now, we actually met while talking about gaming. From there we would start gaming together and while you're gaming, you're just talking and getting to know each other. So just building a relationship just from being like: "hey, do you want to play this video game.

Community

Prolonged connectedness catalyzes interpersonal growth and community-building. Communities support a wide range of socio-emotional and psychological benefits including opportunities to establish meaningful relationships. To understand how BQM experience interconnected networks while navigating physio-virtual environments, respondents were asked to define their sense of community. As Tre shared, communities increase opportunities to engage in enriching interactions that may cultivate meaningful relationships: "the importance of these communities is that they bring proximity to one another, to other people and like-minded spirits and souls. And that allows you to form and forge other connections."

The benefits of community foster relational solace and validation. Communities also support the recognition and honoring of the unique gifts of those who share space. Tre continued: "The proximity thing comes with the ability to leverage talents and resources and just support. Even just as like someone to people, that kind of get you and you can talk to."As participants

experienced safety to be authentic and teamwork in gaming environments, they sought to sustain their sense of zest and belonging. As Jed and Shelby illustrated:

> I had discovered I was Bi. Understanding how to make friends outside of college is my biggest concern. And the secondary concern was like finding a community now that I discovered I was Bi of a community. It doesn't necessarily have to be like minded, but other black queer people. And so being able to find friends online that I then play with online and then actually meet in person; I am definitely feeling a greater sense of community around me.
>
> I started playing mostly because I was working with a bunch of guys. They're all talking about the Destiny that just came out. It's an online multiplayer cooperative game. They're talking about how they're going to do a raid and how they're about to have so much fun. Then they're like, hey, if we don't go back to work, let's all play together. Yeah, it's just a fun time, like something to do together.

While some participants described co-constructed networks consisting of members of diverse experiences, participants noted the range of benefits that a diverse and inclusive community may foster. Jade shared in the following statement:

> My community is based upon people that have like-minded situations or thought processes. I've met all kinds of people straight, gay, trans, whatever the case may be. But I've been community for them, and they've been community for me. They are like family that I chose versus the

> family that I have. They just uplift me, and they push me, and they hold me accountable. I feel like that for me is community. Being able to be yourself around people who let you be yourself.

Communities support self and interpersonal connection. Community is significant resource for BQM who contend with stigma and maltreatment threatening their sense of freedom and authenticity (Arnold et al., 2014; Bowleg, 2013). BQM described overcoming individual and systemic barriers to their wellness by constructing communities of mutuality. As Rex noted, facing toxic bigotry incited them to create safe, inclusive communities using gaming platform:

> I grew up playing Call of Duty on the Xbox 360. So, you know a lot of people are slanging around the N-word. So yeah, 100%. People talk about the N-word and F-word everywhere. That's what kind of led me to create my discord. We recognize that there's a growing amount of people who are tired of being in these types of environments. So, let's see what we can do to remove ourselves from these possible situations.

Conversely, while communities may be beneficial for BQM, all communities do not maintain the same relational foundations. Understanding that community requires authenticity to cultivate meaningful bonds was also expressed by BQM. Sharing identities and experiences may not be the primary factor for establishing an attuned community. Some communities may contend with inner conflict and a misalignment of values. As Masani explained, some gaming communities may lack mutuality and safety for its members:

> My initial gaming community started off with probably a group of 6 or 7 people. So, let's all get together one day and just game it out. So, we all hung out and we played. So, our little group of seven became like a group of 15 and then 15 became 25. But then that's where it kind of bled into the issues with the gay community, where I think people came in with intentions and it started to turn into, oh, well, who can I go home with today? Who am I going to have sex with tonight? Then the more those relationships started happening, the more drama came into the group. So, it was just easier to take yourself out. And I'm on my third gaming gay community and it follows the same suit. So, at this point, I just don't participate in it.

Community is a vital resource for marginalized persons, especially those who are affectional and racial minorities (Singh et al., 2020). Participants shared their experiences of disconnection and connectedness in their physio-virtual environments. Experiences of homophobia, racism, and familial disconnection relate to how BQM seek safety, build communities, and alleviate psycho-emotional pain. Participants have indicated that video games have been instrumental in their socioemotional development throughout their lifespan.

Theme Three- Gaming Journey

The theme of Gaming Journey describes the connection between participants and their engagement with video games throughout their lives. Respondents shared their gaming histories, interests, and current impressions of video games. Findings indicate that gaming has been a prominent feature of each

participant's life. Eight of the nine participants have even played video games since early childhood. Engagement with video games earlier in their development supported BQM with forming an organic understanding of gaming technology as a tool for learning. As Hunter expressed:

> My first experience with video games in general was probably these educational games. I was like, four to five, like after preschool, back on windows 97, we would have these games like Elmo's preschool, Storybook Weaver, Mission Think, and my parents would make me play like an hour a day. You have to go and do some of these educational games. And ever since then, we've always had some sort of gaming system. It definitely started with those educational games that my parents would make us play so we can learn stuff.

Some participants also shared that gaming supported familial bonding within their unique family systems. As Masani narrated: "I grew up in a deaf household. That was how me and my mother established our bond. She was on Super Mario and Pac-man. She wanted somebody to play with. So that became my introduction to gaming at an early age." As BQM recounted their initial exploration of gaming technology, some participants recognized the emotional motivations that prompted gameplay. As Rex shared, video games assisted with fostering solace after experiencing isolation in childhood:

> I would say it [life] was kind of isolated. I didn't really play with friends. And I really didn't have many friends over. So, I would just kind of play

> by myself, until my little brother would join me. We just could play any multiplayer game that we had. It was just me and him.

BQM expressed that gaming assisted with addressing feelings of loneliness deriving from the absence of familial and social connection. Contributors shared further support for video games as buffers against emotional distress. In the following excerpt Jade noted how video games assisted with emotional regulation and self-soothing:

> I was one of those kids where my mom worked like 2 to 3 jobs, so I've always had a video game system. I had Sega, I had a Nintendo 64. It was a way to cope because I was the only child, and my mom was always at work, and I was always with my grandpa. And, you know, being with your grandpa, you got to find something to do because they got a lot going on themselves.

Party Members

Safe social networks shift into communities that enhance opportunities to cultivate meaningful relationships. In gaming spaces, party members are teammates who assist with overcoming challenges and accomplishing goals. For this study, party members are contextualized as enriching relationships that support developing new skills and shifting the occupied realities of users.

Each participant gave detailed accounts of their meaningful relationships cultivated through gameplay or within gaming communities. Participants indicated numerous physio-virtual benefits when establishing meaningful bonds with fellow gamers. For instance, Shelby described experiencing collaboration

and a sense of zest while connecting with party members: “I don’t really get competitive most of the time. Like I’m having fun with my friends. The video game is just a thing we're doing. My friends are what makes it fun.” Party members also assisted with deepening the sense of self and interpersonal connection.

Hunter explained in the following excerpt that mutuality was foundational for their identity and connection with party members:

> Identity affirming, supportive, working together towards mutual character growth and personal growth or professional growth, mutual growth, helping each other out to finish your goals and whatever the way that may be. So yeah, the mutual benefit, being what you need.

Essentially, party members are meaningful relationships that extend beyond virtual gaming limits. As Lance illustrated, party members represent fulfilling relationships in their AFK world: "these connections not being different from the friendships that you make in real life. Like you meet those people, and you just connect and it's just a friendship seal. Just being able to grow with connection."

Party members also uphold mutual commitment and empathy. The experience of empathy assisted with developing enriching relationships that transcend digital bounds to enrich participants' lives. Jed and Tre expressed their journey of connecting with party members who enhance their physio-virtual experience

> It’s been a great experience of being able to both connect with someone in a video game and then in real life. We [online party members] lived in the same exact town and we actually had met up and like hung out. It’s great to have an online community, but it’s also great for that to be able to translate into meeting them in person because it creates, in my opinion, an even stronger connection, an even stronger bond.
>
> A lot of my close friends I've met through gaming, and we do and talk about other things as well. That social support and network has come through, gaming essentially. That community aspect, you know, goes deeper than just bodies inhabiting the same space. Once you've made those connections, you show up for each other in whatever ways that you have the capacity. I've been a best man at one of my friend's weddings that I've met through gaming.

Party members also support emotional safety and resilience during traumatic events (Rowan et al., 2014). For example, gaming technology assisted with promoting connectedness and mitigating isolation linked with societal challenges such as COVID-19. Mizu shared the relational benefit of party members assisting with overcoming isolation during a global disaster:

> Because even with the pandemic, like when we were on lockdown, that was a little bit tougher than I think I realized because there were days, I didn’t even hear my own voice like I was in the house, by myself. And so just recognizing, I don’t ever have to feel that again because, now I have a sound group of support.

Video games and party members may also support BQM who contend with stigma, grief, and loss. Participants shared vulnerable narratives of how party members helped them to process and overcome psycho-emotional pain after losing loved ones. As Masani shared, their party members are steadfast in their authentic desire to be a source of safety and support for each other:

> Some nights it would get deep. And it's like, if you need to vent, then vent. A major life event will happen with either one of us. The other person was there, you know. He's all the way down in Texas. So, when my father passed, I had not met him in person. We Face Timed, we've talked over the phone, we've talked in chat. But my father passed. It was almost like he was right here beside me. So, it's just that connection felt genuine.

Gaming Influences

To explore how gaming may relate to self-connection for players, participants were asked how gaming communities, genres, and characters influenced their AFK experience. Participants shared that gaming was facilitative for intrapersonal benefits such as character-building and self-acceptance. Gaming Influence also related to aspects of identity development for participants. Jed and Jade shared in the following excerpts that video games assisted with reconnecting with aspects of self while fortifying a sense of tenacity and clarity:

> I think another aspect that [gaming] has impacted is my ability to express myself. So, I used to really be into painting. Then middle school, high school, and college went through, and I didn't have much time for it. Then

> senior year in college came and I realized I kind of want to get back into painting. So, a lot of the paintings that I've done so far are all from video games. So that has definitely given me an avenue to express myself because if not for video gaming, I don't think I'd be interested in painting as much. The video games I've played have inspired me to kind of get back into some of my older hobbies.
>
> Gaming for me has shown me not to give up. It has shown me you got your ass beat on this one round or you kept getting beat, when you get to the final rounds. It showed me that you still have to persevere and push through whatever challenges come your way. So those adventure games for me are like moments where I'm trying to find something and in my real life, I'm still trying to figure out what I want to do, how I want to do it, and what makes sense to me. It's the biggest take away that I've ever taken from video gaming.

Video games also provide opportunities to adopt distinct roles and identities. By engaging in role-playing and fantasy, gamers may be able to develop and bolster aspects of their unique identities. As Hunter and Masani expressed, gaming assisted with understanding and accepting sociocultural factors related to self and others:

> As a person, there are games that I've played that have helped me discover new things about myself. I know those things as a focus on gender and sexual orientation. I was talking about Fallout:
>
> New Vegas was really the first game that like asked you to pick your orientation. So that was the first time I ever like role-played what it would

> be like a character to play a man who was only in love with other men. So that I was one of the things before I even came out to myself, that was something I got to do there.
>
> Video games have introduced me to a feminist side because anything that disrespects a woman or demeans a woman I'm not going to stand for. Most of my choices in video games are always female characters. Character creation, Female. Then when I look at the people that I associate in with real life; I tend to gravitate towards females. I treat them like the baddest woman out here. If a man dating you doesn't treat you how I treat you, then he's not meant for you.

Preceding findings also indicate the connection between video games and resistance to emotional distress. Video games may enhance characteristics critical for navigating disaffirming environments. Rex further notes how video games assisted them with developing relational movement and clarity that influenced how they navigated the corporeal world:

> Thanks to video games, I played my entire high school career, day in, day out. And honestly, if that wasn't there, where would I be? You know, what would I be doing? I'm not sure because there was a lot of negativity surrounding my life, and video games became a point of like helping me to move on, helping me to move forward.

The immersive potential of video games also relates to the AFK experience of participants. Video games may elicit reimagining the self and the functionality of the world. Video games may also be facilitative for integrating aspects of identity

and behaviors. As Lance and Mizu illustrated, their experiences in gaming may involve imagination and integration within their physical environments:

> I had a huge imagination and video games tapped in with that. Just doing all these different things, like being in a whole new worlds and. Delving into creating this whole new person or sometimes even this new you. To be able to go into this world and solve issues to save the world pretty much.
>
> I tend to feel like I'm one way in person and then I get to be somebody else online; I'm learning that they don't have to be two separate entities. I could also very much still be that person online and in-person too. Online doesn't have to be the only safe space. And so, while I enjoy being very direct online, I want to say more aggressive, just less timid and things. Which I tend to be in person sometimes. I can also translate that offline too. So, it's just been a lot of, I guess the easiest way to explain it is it's allowing me to become the same person offline that I am online so I can be more assertive.

Other participants shared how video games assisted with developing interpersonal awareness and skills. By learning to remain in collaborative connection with others, individuals may learn to deepen their sense of self-worth and value (Banks, 2006; Walker 2008). As Shelby and Tre expressed, connections through gameplay heightened their sense of relational clarity, mutuality, and responsibility:

> I do think it makes talking to strangers easier, especially when you're playing randomly online. I do think that there is somewhat of a benefit of getting on a team with a bunch of randoms and you have one other friend or two other friends on it and everyone else you do not know. And learning to work together towards one goal and giving each other good callouts, being a good teammate just in general, just how to be an asset. I've been that resource for other people so there's a sense of mentorship. There's people I've met at [gaming] events that are young kids that are looking for advice on this, that and the third. I somehow found myself in the role of mentorship, too. With that definitely comes a sense of responsibility. But there's a dual feed both ways. So, I say being a resource for them also grows me, to find myself in that capacity. Like, it forces me to a level of self-reflection on me and accountability, knowing that there are people that are looking to me in that way. So, it provides being in that role and that's part of an aspect of community that provides just as much for me in my own growth.

Participants framed escapism within the context of their individual and systemic stressors. Rex shared: "There was always escapism. There was always something I could play, something that could help me to get my mind off. So, I would say video games have helped me move on with my life, move on from, negative situations." Alongside supporting their resilience, video games allowed

BQM to recognize and decompress from navigating societal barriers that may be beyond their control. As Lance and Masani noted in the following excerpt:

> I was saying earlier, maybe that type of escapism to the fantasy world. Kind of like reading fantasy novels just being taken away from your current space, into being something more. [Escaping] I would say, the stresses of everyday life.
>
> Trying to shake it out, the capitalistic adultism. I don't want to call it an escape from reality, but it was kind of an escape from reality. But no, it was a break away from everything. So, in that sense, escaping reality but not escaping reality. I was still very aware of what my living situation was. I just didn't have to think about it for a second.

Participants shared experiences that describe how video games have influenced or enhanced authentic characteristics of their identity. Additionally, BQM of this study acknowledged that gaming provided a means of alleviating ongoing challenges by serving as a tool against isolation while promoting community-building. BQM also shared contextual factors that shaped their engagement with video games throughout their lifespan. Findings hold several notable implications for the relationship between gaming and wellness.

Discussion

Black queer scholars have theorized about the potential of online environments to perpetuate harm and healing for BQM (Hemphill, 1995). Additionally, emerging literature examining gaming technology and psychological health has overlooked the experiences of queer and gender-

expansive persons (Di Cesare et al., 2023). This study explored how BQM experience connection and disconnection within gaming environments. The primary investigator also sought to extend the knowledge base of gaming technology in counseling. Furthermore, this study aimed to center marginalized gamers' distinct experiences in seeking refuge in online communities.

This is one of the first studies in counselor scholarship to explore how Black queer minority men who play video games experience connection and disconnection. Findings from this study provide further understanding of the relational cultural concept of disconnection, namely isolation and oppression.

Participants defined *aspects* of disconnection as loneliness, inauthenticity, and a lack of mutuality. As Rex and Jade shared, isolation and negativity were embedded within their familial and communal environments during childhood. As Shelby expressed, disconnection may also involve a lack of regard and mutuality. Isolation may also become chronic for affectional and racial minorities who are condemned by societal shame and ignorance (Jordan, 2018; Miller & Stiver, 1997; Singh & Moss, 2016).

This study also provided counseling professionals further understanding of the distinguishable factors related to oppression in online environments compared to physical environments. Every participant of this study experienced racism and homophobia in their physio-virtual environments during their lifespan. Tre and Masani faced oppressive danger in their physical environment due to societal treatment of their affectional identities. However, participants expressed mixed experiences of disconnection and oppression in gaming environments. While

some participants such as Rex and Jed shared converging beliefs that racist verbal abuse online can inflict psycho-emotional harm that is oppressive, other participants believed otherwise. For example, Hunter expressed a diverging experience that gaming technology provided a means to cease harmful interactions, an option that may not be afforded in physical environments. AFK experiences of oppressive violence may inform the understanding of disconnection while gaming. Ultimately, this study advanced understanding of how experiencing stigma and oppression can affect minoritized persons in the dual environments that they navigate.

This study highlighted how video games assist Black and affectional minorities with navigating a disaffirming society while creating alternative realities of safety. Gaming technology allowed for a protective form of disconnection that involved discontinuing harmful, undesired, and bigoted encounters. Participants shared resisting acts of violence by initiating disconnection strategies against mistreatment in their physio-virtual environments. For example, Jed discussed muting toxic players, while Hunter and Masani shared dismissing toxicity entirely by using blocking methods. Protective disconnection also involved recognizing the naturally occurring process of distance within relationships. As Hunter noted, disconnection may not infer an absence of concern and love within a meaningful relationship.

This study also advanced and contextualized insight of how dissociative symptoms deriving from traumatic stress may relate to gaming habits and benefit for players (APA,2013). Protective disconnection also bolstered interpersonal

awareness that facilitated finding and preserving aligned connections. Participants shared converging experiences of implementing protective disconnection to circumvent abuse in their physio-virtual environments. For example, Mizu explained disconnection enhanced relational clarity to understand their needs and the needs of others. Findings are also congruent with similar works that observed how affectional and racial minorities have utilized protective methods to resist and diminish toxic bigotry in gaming spaces (Gray, 2012, 2017; Medina, 2021; Richards & Gray, 2018; Shaw, 2012).

Counseling researchers have encouraged their colleagues to recognize the usefulness of RCT for treating the isolation and oppression that limits the capacity of Black and queer persons to build communities and embrace their authenticity (Rose & Brown, 2022; Comstock et al., 2008; Singh & Moss, 2016). This study demonstrates the novel and powerful methods that BQM utilized to resist psycho-emotional harm and condemned isolation through video gameplay and networks. Every participant recognized the capacity of gaming technology to curate safe spaces and relationships that assisted with curtailing physio-virtual distress.

This study also provided novel insight for counseling professionals to reflect on how clients who play video games may establish connections and build communities through play (Adal, 2013). Participants acknowledged how playing video games allowed them to create a sense of safety and belonging within their physio-virtual worlds. As Rex described, contending with online homophobic and racist encounters led them to create their own inclusive space on Discord. Community was noted as a precious resource for resisting oppression, loneliness,

and societal challenges such as COVID-19 for Black and queer communities (Abreau et al., 2022; Baker et al., 2022; Barry et al., 2022).

From a theoretical perspective, this study also extends the applicability of RCT and IPA for concepts related to connection, creativity, and video game technology. RCT and IPA emphasize understanding participants' converging, distinct, embodied, and transcendent experiences (Eatough & Smith. 2008; Finlay, 2009). RCT also recognizes humiliation, bullying, and oppression as contributing factors to chronic disconnection and human suffering (Comstock et al., 2008; Jordan, 2018, Singh & Moss., 2016). Ongoing exposure to oppression is linked to increased psychological distress, substance misuse, a sense of burdensomeness, and suicidality in Black and queer communities (Arnold et al., 2014; English et al., 2021; Szymanski & Gupta, 2009). The experience of marginalization also increases the likelihood of developing mood and anxiety disorders for affectional minorities (King et al., 2008). Therefore, this study expounded on how counselors may use RCT as a conceptual framework to understand the presenting challenges of BQM. Additionally, counseling researchers may also find benefits in using phenomenological approaches to further understand how diverse groups experience video gameplay and environments.

Finding and establishing connections is a step toward living a fuller and healthier life (Jordan, 2018). Counselors should be aware of the gaming platforms and mediums that support the hobbies and interpersonal wellness of clients who play video games (Cade & Gates, 2017). Meaningful relationships enhanced

relational movement towards connection and fulfillment for participants. As Masani and Hunter shared, video games supported familial bonding within their households. Notably, this study showcased how online relationships are just as meaningful for the BQM of this study, further supporting the importance of gaming for interpersonal health. As Lance discussed, gaming communities assisted with finding players who gradually built mutuality and meaning by sharing aspects of themselves while playing. Hunter and Shelby recognized that their virtual connections centered collaboration, affirmation, and empathy. Respondents shared that they retained mutually fulfilling relationships, or party members, through zestful and collaborative activities within video games. These bonds transcended digital limits to influence the AFK experience of BQM. Participants such as Masani and Tre shared experiences of party members serving pivotal roles during major life events, assisting with mitigating grief and loss, and supporting their overall sense of safety and internal worth.

All contributors of this story shared converging experiences of how party members have influenced their lived experience and identity development. For example, Tre also discussed how gaming connections enhanced a sense of mutuality by serving in different relational capacities to support others. Meaningful relationships have also been linked with post-traumatic growth for survivors of traumatic incidents such as oppression and interpersonal violence (Copley & Daniels, 2023). Community connection also supported self-connection for participants.

This study also expanded insight for counseling professional on the capabilities of video games to be tools for learning and identity development (Adal, 2013; Cade & Gates, 2017; Jordan, 2014). BQM in this study creatively utilized gaming technology to build communities and reimagine their identities within virtual landscapes. Participants shared how gaming enhanced their sense of mutuality and self-discovery. Several participants, such as Hunter and Masani, shared that gaming was used for educational and interpersonal learning early in their childhood. Additionally, gaming genres and storylines assisted with understanding gender and affectional orientations. In adulthood, gaming influenced self-connection, allowing participants such as Jade and Rex to persevere, dismiss negative schemas, and honor their autonomy. Shelby and Mizu shared diverging experiences of how online gaming supported relational movement, confidence, and a sense of mutual empathy. Participant experiences align with research that observed video games facilitating educational engagement and learning early during development (Khenissi et al., 2016).

Participants also shared how video games enhanced their innate characteristics. For example, Jed described how video games reignited his sense of creativity and self-expression. Mizu and Shelby noted how their online experiences helped them to be more direct and collaborative. Participants also expressed that gaming allowed them to reimagine different solutions and opportunities to exist. As Lance noted, character creation in video games allowed him to engage his sense of imagination and self-definition more deeply.

Gaming and character creation also assisted with processing affectional identity for Hunter while supporting a deeper understanding of gender for Masani. Scholars have observed a positive relationship between creativity and video gameplay for diverse groups (Jackson et al., 2012). Creativity, especially within online environments, is characterized as a dynamic process that produces novel approaches to solving existing challenges (Russ et al., 1999; Young, 1985). Counselors would benefit from discussing the relationship between video games and their clients' identities, creativity, and needs (Cade & Gates, 2017; Shaw, 2012).

Creativity is also an expression of imagination that assists with resisting oppression and redefining oneself and reality. Participant experiences also affirm recent suggestions from scholars who note the capacity for virtual gaming to elicit connections that foster authenticity and learning (Wang et al., 2018). The process of naming pain and self-defining is a powerful tool for deepened understanding and the liberation of oppressed identities (Collins, 2002). Prominent Black and queer scholars have long delineated the relationship between meaningful bonds, self-discovery, and freedom for Black affectional minorities (Baldwin, 1963; Lorde, 1982). Self-definition is vital for BQM tasked with reconstructing their identities, histories, and communities disenfranchised by societal negligence and global oppression (Arnold et al., 2014; Jones & Ferguson, 2020; Mumford, 2016). Counselors working with racial and affectional minorities who play video games may consider exploring how their choice of games relate to their sense of autonomy, authenticity, and creativity.

The results suggest that video games provide boons that enrich users' lives. As technology and immersion within online environments increase, the link between both worlds cannot be debased (Gray, 2012; McGonigal, 2015; Przybylski et al., 2012). Recognizing the capabilities of cyberspace to support identity development for young queer men is essential (Harper et al., 2016). Understanding the historical context of identity and community development is critical in understanding the experiences of BQM (Jones & Ferguson, 2020). Identity development may involve reconciling psycho-emotional pain associated with societal mistreatment and the interrelated nature of racial, gendered, and affectional orientations for BQM (Bowleg, 2013; DiPillo, 2009; Loiacano, 1989). According to RCT, identity development may also entail learning about self through relational interactions with others (Banks, 2006; Collins, 2002; Jordan, 2018; Rose & Brown, 2022). Findings are consistent with previous works from gaming and counseling researchers who concluded that identity development occurs within multiple contexts for Black, Latinx, and queer gamers (Di Cesare et al., 2023; Richards & Gray, 2018; Medina, 2021).

The findings of this study also counter notions that video gameplay is inherently problematic and a form of escapism, as some participants were reluctant to describe their gaming habits as such (Ferguson, 2011; Kneer et al., 2014). Participants framed their sense of escapism by juxtaposing the lifelong stressors of existing as a minoritized person within physio-virtual environments that may be disaffirming (Meyers, 2003; Gray, 2017; Medina, 2021). By disregarding the numerous contextual factors that link to gaming habits, scholars'

risk pathologizing the innovative ways that marginalized communities soothe the wounds of societal mistreatment. Therefore, this study further supported depathologizes gaming and connection strategies that are essential to understanding the experiences of diverse gamers and BQM (Gray, 2012; Rose & Brown, 2022; Snodgrass et al., 2014).

The BQM who contributed to this study recognized the potential of video games to alleviate distress and establish communities. Respondents also drew inspiration from their gaming environments to honor their authenticity and sense of belonging. Moreover, mutuality, authenticity, and connectedness are pivotal sources of resistance to isolation and intersecting oppression for BQM (Rose & Brown, 2022; Reed & Miller, 2016). The findings of this study further convey the importance and centrality of connectedness for minoritized groups. It is paramount to recognize and support the innovative methods employed by marginalized communities to create safety within their lived realities. Moreover, BQM demonstrated their immense capacity to resist forces of marginalization to transform their experience and build life-enriching communities. Overall, this study's findings allow for further understanding of the potential of video games to enhance learning, resistance, community-building, and psycho-emotional wellness for video game players.

Implications for Counseling

Participants' experiences as detailed in the interviews for this study can assist counseling professionals with several developmental considerations. First, counselors can increase their understanding of oppression and underrepresented

groups in counseling literature. By learning more about the experiences of underrepresented groups, counselors indirectly contribute to building their multicultural awareness (Ratts et al., 2016).

Counseling scholars also suggest understanding social justice and systemic challenges related to the holistic health of minoritized communities (Harper et al., 2013). This work advanced opportunities for trainees and professionals to increase their understanding of the needs of underrepresented groups in counseling research and treatment, such as Black and queer minority men (Rose & Brown, 2022).

Findings from this study also present clinical implications for counselors working with minorities, gamers, and survivors of traumatic incidents. Exposure to acts of violence can be traumatic and can affect the sense of interpersonal safety for survivors (Bernard et al., 2021; Birrell & Freyd, 2006). Understanding the experiences of connection for BQM requires intersectional awareness of how the multiple sources of disconnection, particularly racism and homophobia, link to the experiences of BQM who game (Arnold et al.,2014; Bowleg, 2013; Carter, 2007).

Counselors must strive to understand the psycho-emotional wounds that may develop through traumatic adversity and toxic socialization for male-identified persons (Crete & Singh, 2014). To alleviate aspects of marginalization, BQM created distinct, inclusive gaming communities that supported their belonging and identities. Counselors must understand how authenticity, empathy,

and community are vital decolonizing tools for supporting the wellness of minoritized persons (Singh & Moss, 2016; Singh et al., 2020).

Counselors can work to build rapport with their clients by exploring their sense of connectedness or disconnection achieved through video gameplay. As Jordan (2014) suggested, counselor educators should encourage trainees to envision the utility of video games to build rapport and enact virtual interventions with clients. This study is important because it highlights how video games can be facilitative for psychosocial benefits throughout the lifespan for minoritized players.

Participant experiences highlight how online platforms may be ridden with bigotry and oppressive rhetoric. Counselor educators have also underscored the importance of understanding how internet technology is weaponized to bully and suppress the experiences of others (Green et al., 2023). The need for clinicians to understand and develop online interventions has increased drastically since the COVID-19 pandemic (Riva et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2020).

Counselors can benefit from learning more about the mental health implications of online environments and their potential to support or harm the well-being of prospective clients. For example, counseling researchers Cade and Gates (2017) provided a guide solely for counseling professionals to learn more about gaming culture. Additionally, counselor educators are encouraged to demystify myths and stigma about video gameplay and to encourage students and supervisees to build comfort with engaging with this topic with clients (Adal, 2013; Cade & Gates, 2017; Shaw, 2010).

Findings of this study echo conclusions from previous works that underscore the capacity of video games to enhance learning outcomes. Counseling educators may explore the usefulness of gaming technology within a classroom setting to facilitate an engaging learning environment (Khenissi et al. 2016). Counseling educators may incorporate interdisciplinary literature, case examples, and gamification strategies in the classroom that illustrate how video games can be experienced by and supportive of clients. This may assist with developing innovative approaches for teaching and training in counselor education programs.

Limitations

The RCT framework was utilized to conceptualize the experiences of BQM. While the RCT lens is valuable, it may limit the captured nuance of participant data distinct for the IPA process (Finlay, 2009). Another limitation is the small sample size for this study. However, Smith et al. (2009) explained that three to six participants are an ideal sample size for graduate students, with the potential for Ph.D. students to hold more flexibility and thus time to devote to their projects. Additionally, data for this study did not derive from multiple sources; instead, the sample was comprised of a homogenous group of participants. Furthermore, the interview time for some participants was shorter than preferred for phenomenological research (Smith et al., 2009).

Another limitation involves the conceptualization of participant data. Black queer men are a non-monolithic community. Other Black and queer persons may experience gaming and virtual communities differently. Additionally,

participants for this study were outside of the primary researchers' social networks. There were very few opportunities to cultivate a relationship with participants before conducting the interviews for this study. While this may not be a significant limitation, it is notable considering this study's theoretical framing and the primary investigator's intentions.

Future Research

All participants expressed that navigating other online environments, such as Twitter and Discord, involved exposure to disaffirming beliefs alongside opportunities for interconnection. Future counseling researchers could explore the complexities of online stigma and interconnection for those using various social media platforms. Furthermore, researchers should also examine the relationship between isolation and psychological health for diverse groups. For example, scholars may use psychometric measures such as the Relational Health Indices to examine the quantitative components of gamers' social wellness (Liang et al., 2009).

Participants in this study shared how video games and virtual communities have nearly been concomitant throughout their lifespan development. Another suggestion for future research endeavors is exploring how different demographic variables, such as age, link to gamers' experiences. With the average age of gamers being 35, future research may focus on youth or middle-aged people who play video games. Future research efforts may also explore qualitative approaches to better understand the nature of video games and identity development, especially for adolescent and young adult gamers (Medina, 2021).

Participants also expressed that video games facilitated character-building and several learning objectives. This study is one of the first in counseling scholarship to explore the ways that video games can facilitate connection for minority groups. Aligning with gaming education research, Counselor educators

may benefit from understanding how aspects of gaming, such as gamification, may enrich the education interventions within a clinical and classroom setting.

Several participants implicitly and explicitly disclosed that they were neurodivergent, and gaming assisted with engagement and learning (Khenissi et al., 2016). Gaming accounts for various interactive goals and outcomes that assist with skill acquisition for persons with diverse brain functioning. Thus, researchers may also consider exploring how gaming may benefit neurodivergent gamers.

Additionally, participants shared how video games facilitated inner understanding and connectedness. Gaming tech and lore have the potential to build rapport and facilitate an interactive process in therapy. Counselors are encouraged to understand further how the mythos and mechanics of video games could support the therapeutic alliance for clients who seek counseling (Cade & Gates, 2017; Dini, 2012).

Counseling researchers may also consider extending knowledge of video game technology to support the therapeutic alliance and address interpersonal issues in session (Jordan, 2014). Counselors can develop innovative interventions and clinical approaches by utilizing gaming technology to explore prosocial benefits such as authenticity, creativity, connectedness, problem-solving, and psychological well-being.

Conclusion

This study advances suggestions from counseling researchers to increase collective competence of creative and relational approaches for clinical practice and education (Duffey, 2007; Duffey & Somody, 2011). Additionally, this work

aligns with multicultural and social justice tenets for expanding scholarship on underrepresented populations in counseling (Ratts et al., 2016; Singh et al., 2020). Isolation and oppression are threats to the collective well-being of marginalized communities. Understanding how video games support the resistance to psycho-emotional disturbance related to oppression is critical to developing innovative approaches to clinical treatment.

BQM reported cultivating online bonds that transcended virtual limits to enrich their lived experience. RCT is also a beneficial approach for conceptualizing and addressing the unique needs of minorities and video game players in therapy. This work extends what is known about gaming science and its relationship to human health in counseling.

Section 3: Conclusion

The two studies conducted for this dissertation advance the knowledge base and literature on gaming technology and its relationship to human health within counseling. To the primary researcher's knowledge, there were no studies within the counseling field that examined forms of racialized distress, psychological wellness, and gaming motivations for PoC at the time of this study. Results from study one indicated a relationship between racialized distress, particularly cultural racism, and psychological well-being that was partially mediated by recreational gaming motivations for POC. Moreover, results from study one revealed a direct negative relationship between institutional racism and psychological well-being.

Results contribute to mounting evidence that showcases not only the psycho-emotional harm that oppression may elicit but also the ways that POC mitigate said harm through various protective strategies (Carter, 2007; Harrell, 2000; Utsey et al., 2002). Furthermore, study one extends the knowledge of the prominence and pervasiveness of video games as a phenomenon utilized for diverse purposes by diverse groups (Gray, 2017; Medina, 2021).

Study two also extends the counseling field's understanding of gaming technology. By exploring how video game players experience connection and disconnection in gaming environments, counseling professionals can broaden their awareness of isolation and community healing (Comstock et al., 2008; Jordan, 2018). Community and safety are notable boons that support resistance to oppression and mental distress for Black and queer communities (Bowleg, 2013).

Like many racial and affectional minorities, Black queer men are exposed to intersecting sources of marginalization that can be deleterious to their holistic health (Arnold et al., 2014; Earnshaw et al., 2021; Meyers, 2003; Szymanski & Gupta, 2009). Similarly to other marginalized groups, Black queer men used gaming technology to develop relational safety and kinship within their online communities (Medina, 2021; Richards & Gray, 2018). These online communities increased the likelihood of establishing meaningful relationships that enriched participants' lived experiences (Gray, 2012; Harper et al., 2016; Jordan, 2018). Moreover, participants in the second study expressed how video games assisted with promoting identity development and internal resilience while navigating a disaffirming environment.

By exploring the relationship of psychological wellness from quantitative and qualitative approaches, this dissertation extends awareness of the relationship between video games and human health. Additionally, this dissertation supports multicultural and technological awareness for counseling practitioners and researchers (Cade & Gates, 2017; Ratts et al., 2016). Altogether, video games benefit people of color who are exposed to microaggressions and various forms of oppression. It is imperative for counselor practitioners and researchers to better understand how gaming technology may influence human wellness. By increasing knowledge of gaming tech, the counseling field may comprehend potential issues gamers face while developing innovative strategies to address them.

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Tables

TABLE 1

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

RACIAL IDENTITY	**Number (%)**
AFRICAN AMERICAN	222 (34.5)
MULTI-RACIAL	154 (23.9)
ASIAN	84 (13)
LATINX	76 (11.8)
INDIGENOUS	60 (9.3)
HAWAIIAN	48 (7.5)
AFFECTIONAL IDENTITY	
HETEROSEXUAL	393 (61)
BISEXUAL	73 (11.3)
GAY/SGL	50 (7.8)
ACE/DEMISEXUAL	36 (5.6)
PANSEXUAL	35 (5.4)
LESBIAN	34 (5.3)
QUEER	23 (3.6)
GENDER IDENTITY	
MAN	391 (60.7)
WOMAN	212 (32.9)

NON-BINARY / NON-CONFORMING/GENDERFLUID	18 (2.8)
AGENDER	7 (1.1)
TWO-SPIRITED	13 (2)
EDUCATION LEVEL	
HIGHSCHOOL/GED	165 (25.6)
ASSOCIATES	95 (14.8)
BACHELORS	231 (35.9)
MASTERS	104 (16.1)
DOCTORAL	48 (7.5)
GAMING STYLE	
CASUAL	337 (52.3)
COMPETITIVE	176 (27.3)
PROFESSIONAL	95 (14.8)
UNDECIDED	35 (5.4)
HOURS GAMING (WEEKLY)	
1-5	178 (27.6)
5-10	280 (43.5)
20+	179 (27.8)

Note. The mean age of participants was 29.7 years old (*SD* = 7.47).

Table 2

Correlation Matrix for Demographic Variables and PWB

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
BAA	-												
LX	.31**	-											
ASN	-.29**	-.02	-										
IDN	-.19**	-.00	.03	-									
HW	-.19**	-.05	-.01	.010	-								
MR	-.12**	.000	.050	-.01	.01	-							
GEN	.02	.04	.08*	.12**	.13**	.23**	-						
ASI	-.09*	-.01	-.05	-.12**	-.01	-.09*	-.19**	-					
EDU	.00	.07	.03	.05	.09*	.02	.00	.02	-				
OTP	.00	-.07	.03	-.11**	-.05	-.08*	-.07*	.16**	.05	-			

HP	-.10**	.08*	-.09*	.02	-.02	.09*	.00	.05	.01	.20**	-	
GS	-.08*	.08*	.01	.19**	.17**	.08*	.06	.11**	.07	.02	.17**	-
PWB	.27**	-.04	-.11**	-.15**	-.14**	-.11**	-.05	.06	.08*	.13**	.00	-.13**

Note. BAA= Black/African American. LX = Latinx. ASN = Asian. IDN = Indigenous/Native. HW = Hawaiin. MR = Multiracial. Gen = Gender. ASI = Affectional/Sexual Identity. Edu = Education. OTP = Online Teamplay. HP = Hours Played. GS = Gaming Style. PWB = Psychological Well-Being.

Table 3

Correlation Matrix for Gaming Motivations and PWB

Variable	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**
Social	--							
Escape	.46**	--						
Competition	.52**	.44**	--					
Coping	.46**	.55**	.49**	--				
Skill Dev	.52**	.39**	.50**	.46**	--			
Fantasy	.48**	.56**	.51**	.51**	.51**	--		
Recreation	.26*	.33**	.19**	.41**	.25**	.25**	--	
PWB	-.02	-.02	-.10**	.10*	.05	-.14*	.46**	--

Note. * Indicates significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). ** indicates significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). *** is significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed). PWB = Psychological Well-Being.

Table 4

Regression Table for Cultural Racism with Gaming Motives Predicting PWB

Variable	b	SE	*t*	95% CI LL	95% CI UL	*p*	F	R^2
							21.20	.32
CultR	.146	.001	3.95	.003	.009	.00***		
Fantasy	-.22	.02	-4.70	-.11	-.06	.00***		
Skill Dev	.13	.02	3.01	.02	.11	.00**		
Social	-.01	.01	-.27	.01	.01	.78		
Escape	-.09	.02	-2.16	-.10	-.01	.03*		
Competition	-.08	.02	-1.97	-.08	-.00	.04*		
Recreation	.43	.02	10.79	.18	.26	.00***		
Coping	.07	.02	1.66	-.01	.09	.09		
Latinx+	-.03	.40	-1.01	-.11	.03	.31		
Asian								
Native	-.04	.04	-1.13	.12	.03	.25		
Hawaiian								
Multiracial	-.07	.04	-2.15	-.17	-.00	.03		
	-.03	.05	-.87	-.14	.05	.38		

-.06	.04	-1.88	-.18	.00	.06

Note. * Indicates significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). ** indicates significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). *** is significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed). CultR = Cultural Racism.

Table 5

Regression Table with Institutional Racism and Gaming Motivations Predicting PWB

				95% CI				
Variable	b	SE	*t*	LL	UL	*p*	F	R^2
							19.76	.30
InsR	.017	.002	.48	2.64	3.02	.63		
Fantasy	-.22	.02	-4.46	-.16	-.06	.00***		
Skill	.10	.02	2.46	.01	.10	.01*		
Social	-.03	.01	-.67	-.02	.01	.49		
Escape	-.09	.02	-2.01	-.09	-.008	.04*		
Competition	-.10	.02	-2.34	-.09	-.01	.02*		
Recreation	.46	.02	11.55	.19	.27	.00***		
Coping	.09	.02	2.01	.001	.10	.04*		
Latinx+	-.01	.03	-.15	-.08	.07	.87		
Asian								
Native	-.06	.04	-1.96	-.15	.00	.05		
Hawaiian								
Multiracial	-.08	.04	-2.48	-.18	-.02	.01		
	-.03	.05	-1.01	-.15	.05	.31		

-.07	.04	-2.17	-.20	-.01	.02

Note. * Indicates significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). ** indicates significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). *** is significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed).

Table 6

Regression Matrix for Indvidual Racism, Gaming Motives, and PWB

				95% CI				
Variable	b	SE	*t*	LL	UL	*p*	F	R^2
							19.79	.30
IndR	.036	.002	1.01	-.002	.008	.31		
Fantasy	-.22	.02	-4.64	-.17	-.06	.00***		
Skill	.11	.02	2.56	.01	.10	.01*		
Social	-.02	.008	-.57	-.02	.01	.56		
Escape	-.08	.02	-1.74	-.09	.05	.08		
Competition	-.11	.02	-2.15	-.09	-.01	.01*		
Recreation	.47	.02	11.70	.19	.27	.00***		
Coping	.08	.02	1.82	-.003	.10	.06		
Latinx+	-.002	.04	-.05	-.08	.07	.95		
Asian								
Native	-.05	.04	-1.48	-.14	.01	.13		
Hawaiian								
Multiracial	-.08	.04	-2.29	-.18	-.01	.02		
	-.02	.05	-.71	-.14	.06	.47		

-.07	.04	-2.27	-.21	-.01	.02

Note. * Indicates significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). ** indicates significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). *** is significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed). IDR = Individual Racism.

Table 7

Participant Demographic Information

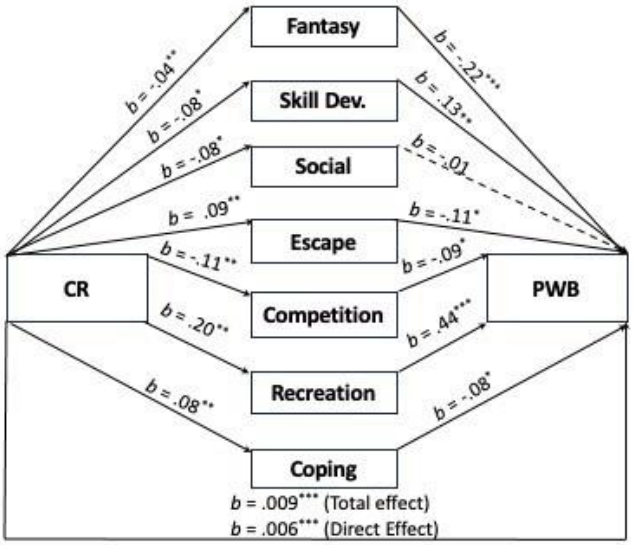
	N	%
GENDER		
MALE	5	55
NON-BINARY	4	44
AFFECTIONAL IDENTITY		
BISEXUAL	2	22
QUEER	3	33
GAY	4	44
REGION		
MIDWEST	2	33
NORTHEAST	3	33
SOUTHCENTRAL	1	11
SOUTHEAST	3	33
GAMING STYLE		
CASUAL	4	44
COMPETITIVE	3	33
RECREATIONAL	2	22
GAMING GENRE		
ADVENTURE	3	33
FIGHTING	1	11
FPS	1	11

PUZZLE/TACT	2	22
RPG	2	22

Figures

Figure 1

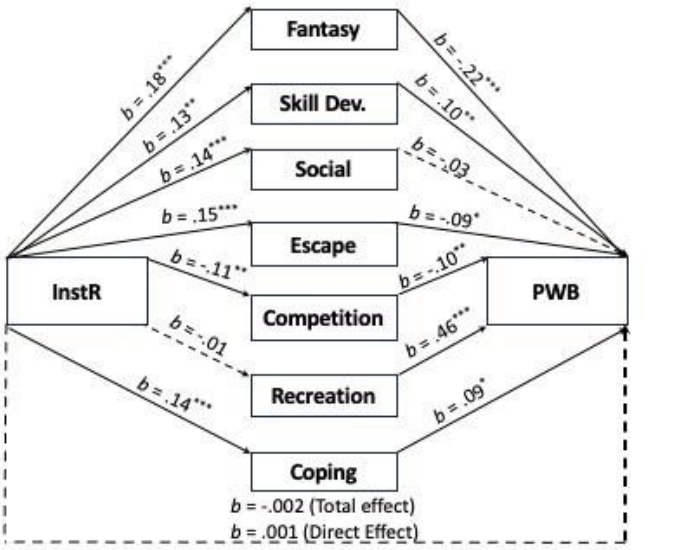
Mediation Model for Cultural Racism, Gaming Motives, and PWB with Standardized Effects



Note. CR = Cultural Racism. Dotted arrows indicate an insignificant pathway. Simple arrows indicate a significant pathway. * indicates p< .05, ** indicates p< .01, and *** indicates p< .001.

Figure 2

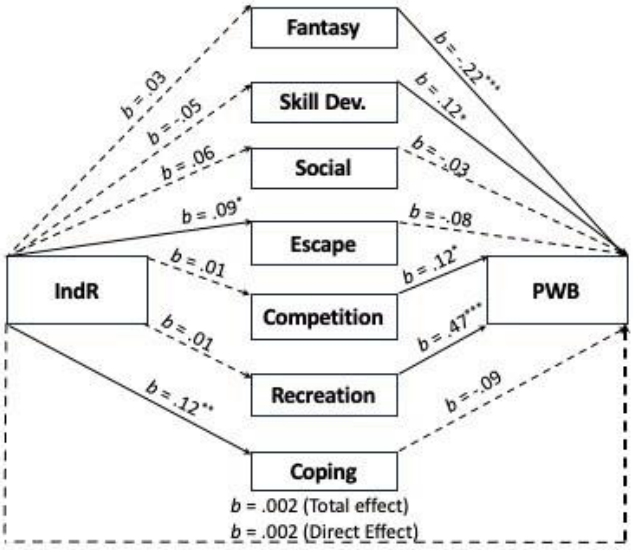
Mediation Model for Institutional Racism Gaming Motives and PWB with Standardized Effects



Note. InstR = Institutional Racism. Dotted arrows indicate an insignificant pathway. Simple arrows indicate a significant pathway. * indicates p< .05, ** indicates p< .01, and *** indicates p< .001.

Figure 3

Mediation Model for Individual Racism, Gaming Motives and PWB with Standardized Effects



Note. IndR = Individual Racism. Dotted arrows indicate an insignificant pathway. Simple arrows indicate a significant pathway. * indicates p< .05, ** indicates p< .01, and *** indicates p< .001.

Appendix Measures

Demographic Questionnaire

1.Please indicate your gender identity

a. Non-Binary/Gender-Fluid

b. Woman

c. Man

d. Agender

e. _____ (Please self-describe)

2. What is your Age?

3. Please specify your race

a. White

b. Black or African American

c. Latino or Hispanic

d. Asian

e. Native American

f. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander

g. Bi-racial

h. Not listed_____

4.What is your affectional orientation?

a. Asexual

b. Bisexual

c. Gay

d. Lesbian

e. Pansexual

f. Heterosexual

g. Queer

h. ___ (not listed or self-describe)

5. When you think of home, where is this located?

6. What is the highest degree or level of education you have completed?

a. Diploma or GED Equivalent

b. Associate degree

c. Bachelor's Degree

d. Master's Degree

e. Doctoral degree

7.At what age did you start to play video games?

8. Do you use any streaming platforms?

a. Discord

b. Twitch

c. YouTube

d. Vaughnlive

e. Mixer

9. Do you play video games online with others?

a. Yes

b. No

10. What gaming system do you primarily play video games on?

a. PC/Mac

b. Mobile Device (android, iOS)

c. PlayStation systems

d. Nintendo systems

e. Xbox systems

11. Around how many hours do you play video games during the week?

12. How would you describe your gaming habits?

a. Casual

b. Competitive

c. Professional

d. Undecided/Unsure

Motivations for Online Gaming Questionnaire (MOGQ)

I play online games:

1. ... because I can get to know new people
2. ... because gaming helps me to forget about daily hassles
3. ... because I enjoy competing with others
4. ... because gaming helps me get into a better mood
5. ... because gaming sharpens my senses
6. ... because I can do things that I am unable to do, or I am not allowed to do in real life
7. ... for recreation
8. **... because I can meet many different people**
9. ... **because it makes me forget real life**
10. ... **because I like to win**
11. ... **because it helps me get rid of stress**
12. ... because it improves my skills
13. ... to feel as if I was somebody else
14. ... because it is entertaining
15. ... because it is a good social experience
16. ... because gaming helps me escape reality
17. ... because it is good to feel that I am better than others
18. ... because it helps me channel my aggression
19. ... because it improves my concentration
20. ... to be somebody else for a while
21. ... because I enjoy gaming
22. ... because gaming gives me company
23. ... to forget about unpleasant things or offences

24. ... for the pleasure of defeating others
25. ... because it reduces tension
26. ... because it improves my coordination skills
27. ... because I can be in another world

IRRS-B

This survey is intended to sample some of the stressful experiences people of color have in the United States because of their minoritized status. Some events may only occur once, while others may occur frequently. Below you will find items related to some of these experiences. Please mark the number on the scale (0 to 4) that reflects your initial reaction to this event at the time it happened. Do not leave any items blank. If an event occurred more than once, refer to the first time it occurred. If an event did not happen, circle 0 and go on to the next item.

0 = This has never happened to me. 1 = This event happened but did not bother me. 2 = This event happened, and I was slightly upset. 3 = This event happened, and I was upset. 4 = This event happened, and I was extremely upset.

1. You notice that crimes committed by White people tend to be romanticized, whereas the same crime committed by a person of color is portrayed as savagery and the person who committed it as an animal.
2. Salespeople/clerks did not say thank you or show other forms of courtesy and respect (i.e., put your things in a bag) when you shopped.
3. You notice that when a person of color is killed by a White mob or policeman, no one is sent to jail.
4. You have been threatened with physical violence by an individual or group of White people.

5. You have observed that white kids who commit violent crimes are portrayed as "just kids" and children of color as "wild animals."

6. You seldom hear or read anything positive about people of color on the radio, TV, in newspapers, or in history books.

7. While shopping at a store, the salesclerk assumed you couldn't afford certain items (i.e., you were directed toward the items on sale).

8. You were the victim of a crime, and the police treated you as if you should accept it as part of being a person of color.

9. You were treated with less respect and courtesy than Whites while in a store, restaurant, or other business establishments.

10. You were passed over for an important project, although you were more qualified and competent than the White person given the task.

11. Whites have stared at you as if you didn't belong in the same place as them, whether it was a restaurant, theater, or other places of business.

12. You have observed the police treat White people with more respect and dignity than they do people of color.

13. You have been subjected to racist jokes by White people in positions of authority, and you did not protest for fear they might have held it against you.

14.While shopping at a store, or when attempting to make a purchase, you were ignored as if you were not a serious customer or didn't have any money.

15. You have observed situations where other people of color were treated harshly or unfairly due to their race.

16. You have heard reports of White people who have committed crimes and falsely reported that a person of color was responsible for the crime in an effort to cover up their deeds.

17. You notice that the media plays up those stories that cast people of color in negative ways (child abusers, rapists, savages, muggers, etc.), usually accompanied by a large picture of a person of color looking angry or disturbed.

18. You have heard racist remarks or comments about persons of color spoken with impunity by White public officials or other influential White people.

19. You have been given more work or the most undesirable jobs at your place of employment, while White people of equal or less seniority and credentials are given less work and more desirable tasks.

20. You have heard or seen other people of color express the desire to be White or to have physical characteristics because they disliked being of color or thought it was ugly.

21. White people have treated you as if you were unintelligent and needed things explained to you slowly or numerous times.

22. You were refused an apartment or other housing; you suspect it was because you are a person of color.

Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scales (PWB)

Please indicate your level of disagreement or agreement by marking scores ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*) for the following items.

1. I am not afraid to voice my opinions, even when they are in opposition to the opinions of most people.

2. In general, I feel I am in charge of the situation in which I live.

3. I am not interested in activities that will expand my horizons.

4. Most people see me as loving and affectionate.

5. I live life one day at a time and don't really think about the future.

6. When I look at the story of my life, I am pleased with how things have turned out.

7. My decisions are not usually influenced by what everyone else is doing.

8. The demands of everyday life often get me down.

9. I think it is important to have new experiences that challenge how you think about yourself and the world.

10. Maintaining close relationships has been difficult and frustrating for me.

11. I have a sense of direction and purpose in life.

12. In general, I feel confident and positive about myself.

13. I tend to worry about what other people think of me.

14. I do not fit very well with the people and the community around me.

15. When I think about it, I haven't really improved much as a person over the years.

16. I often feel lonely because I have few close friends with whom to share my concerns.

17. My daily activities often seem trivial and unimportant to me.

18. I feel like many of the people I know have gotten more out of life than I have.

19. I tend to be influenced by people with strong opinions.

20. I am quite good at managing the many responsibilities of my daily life.

21. I have the sense that I have developed a lot as a person over time.

22. I enjoy personal and mutual conversations with family members or friends.

23. I don't have a good sense of what it is I'm trying to accomplish in life.

24. I like most aspects of my personality.

25. I have confidence in my opinions, even if they are contrary to the general consensus.

26. I often feel overwhelmed by my responsibilities

27. I do not enjoy being in new situations that require me to change my old familiar ways of doing things.

28. People would describe me as a giving person, willing to share my time with others.

29. I enjoy making plans for the future and working to make them a reality.

30. In many ways, I feel disappointed about my achievements in life.

31. It's difficult for me to voice my own opinions on controversial matters.

32. I have difficulty arranging my life in a way that is satisfying to me.

33. For me, life has been a continuous process of learning, changing, and growth.

34. I have not experienced many warm and trusting relationships with others.

35. Some people wander aimlessly through life, but I am not one of them

36. My attitude about myself is probably not as positive as most people feel about themselves.

. I judge myself by what I think is important, not by the values of what others think is important.

38. I have been able to build a home and a lifestyle for myself that is much to my liking.

39. I gave up trying to make big improvements or changes in my life a long time ago.

40. I know that I can trust my friends, and they know they can trust me.

41. I sometimes feel as if I've done all there is to do in life.

42. When I compare myself to friends and acquaintances, it makes me feel good about who I am.

Phenomenological/RCT Interview Guide

R1: How do Black queer gamers experience connection and disconnection in online gaming communities?

Identity

- What has led to your journey playing video games?
- Do you believe in gamer identity? How would you describe your gamer identity?
- What have you enjoyed most about gaming?

Connection

- How would you define connection?
- How have you experienced connection in gaming communities?
- Have you found other video game players to be connected to?
- How did making these connections feel?

Disconnection

- How would you define Oppression?
- As a Black person have you ever dealt with oppression?
- As an affectional minority, can you share how you have experienced oppression?
- How would you define disconnection??
- Have you experienced disconnection offline?
    - How about online?
- How did these experiences feel?

Physio-virtual

- Has your experience with video games connected to your experience in the real-world experience?
- Can you describe how video games or any game have affected you in the physical world?
- Are there certain video games or characters that have taught your life lessons?
- Are there any additional ways that video games or communities have impacted you?