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Article 70

The Social Experience of Internet Gamers: A Pilot Study

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Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological pilot study was to explore the lived social experiences of Internet gamers. Findings highlighted the impact of Internet gaming on social interactions, social functioning, and social identity. The findings in the pilot study related to addiction supported the need for future research into the legitimacy of Internet Gaming Disorder as a mental health issue.

Internet Gaming Disorder

Internet games are played internationally by people from various backgrounds, generations, and cultures. Research shows that some individuals play Internet games excessively and share behavioral components of impulse control disorders (Shapira, Goldsmith, Keck, Khosla, & McElroy, 2000; Young, 2009) and substance dependence (Griffiths, 2000; Young, 2009). Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD) is currently being considered as a mental health diagnosis and is outlined in Section III of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.; *DSM–5*; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). Further research into the psychosocial experience of online gamers is necessary to understand how these criteria impact assessment of Internet Gaming Disorder. This pilot study explored the lived social experiences of Internet gamers by interviewing two gamers who play at least 30 hours per week and by

examining a support blog for self-identified Internet gaming addicts. For clarity, the term "virtual" social experience is defined as any human-to-human interaction occurring over the Internet and the term "real-world" social experience is defined as any human-to-human interaction occurring outside the Internet.

Prevalence

Gamers have a myriad of choices on the Internet in terms of virtual worlds to explore through play and social realms to navigate through interaction with other online gamers. Some of the most popular forms of Internet gaming include, but are not limited to, Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), such as World of Warcraft; First-Person Shooters (FPSs), such as Call of Duty; casual Browser Games (CBGs), such as DarkOrbit; Simulation Games such as The Sims; and hybrid forms like Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing First-Person Shooters (MMORPFPSs), such as Neocron. In MMORPGs, players take on virtual personae called avatars and have the opportunity to socialize in guilds and to interact with each other to achieve goals in the game. MMORPFPs combine this role-playing form with the 3-D ego-perspective of FPSs. Finally, simulation games situate players in an alternate reality where players can perform real-world actions in a separate virtual world (Kuss & Griffiths, 2012; Young, 2009).

On a global scale, IGD has the potential to impact the lives of people in any country that has Internet access. In a study on problematic gaming prevalence, problematic gamers reported having fewer friends in the real world than non-problematic gamers and considered it easier to meet people online than in the real world (Porter, Starcevic, Berle, & Fenech, 2010). In a similar vein, researchers reported that 12% of MMORPG players prefer to socialize in virtual realms than in real-world realms (Ng & Wiemer-Hastings, 2005). The above studies utilized different assessment instruments, criteria, and populations, and the findings indicate a significant problem across generations and nationalities of online gamers with significant consequences.

Consequences of Problematic Online Gaming

Literature on the negative consequences of IGD is increasing in prevalence, and studies emphasize problems in the area of psychosocial and psychiatric distress. Studies report links between addiction to Internet gaming and psychosocial problems including the absence of real-world relationships (Allison, von Wahlde, Shockley, & Gabbard, 2006), aggression and hostility (Chan & Rabinowitz, 2006), decreased academic achievement (Jeong & Kim, 2010; Rehbein, Psych, Kleimann, Mediasci, & Mossle, 2010), and sacrificing real-world activities in favor of virtual activities (Griffiths, Davies, & Chappell, 2004; Rehbein et al., 2010). Other studies demonstrate the relationship between IGD and psychiatric symptomatology, including depression (Peng & Liu, 2010, van Rooij, Schoenmakers, Vermulst, van den Eijnden, & Van De Mheen, 2011; Yen, Ko, Yen, Chang, & Cheng, 2009), loneliness (Lemmens, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2010), and suicidal ideations (Rehbein et al., 2010). The documentation of these damaging effects of the overuse of Internet games merits research into how gamers are drawn into the social world of online gaming.

Social Aspects of Online Gaming

The social experience of online gamers has been explored in multiple studies in recent years, and specific findings have been reported regarding the unique social experience of Internet gamers with signs of IGD. In a qualitative case study of an 18-year-old male excessive MMORPG player, researchers conducted psychiatric interviews to show that IGD is associated with devotion of time to the activity, i.e., as much as 16 hours daily, avoiding sleep, and absence of real-world social interaction (Allison et al., 2006). The researchers reported that the participant in this case study created an ideal virtual identity to compensate for the inadequacy he felt in the real world. Similarly, in another qualitative study, Wan and Chiou (2006) interviewed 10 adolescents meeting IGD criteria to find that online gaming fulfills social and personal needs left unmet in the real world. Chappell, Eatough, Davies, and Griffiths (2006) emphasized the similarities between the symptoms of gamers addicted to, or previously addicted to, the MMORPG Everquest and those associated with substance dependence, including salience, withdrawal, cravings, relapse, and interpersonal conflict. As a result of research findings that identify online gamers' skewed social experience as a unique factor of IGD and related symptoms, further research is needed to capture the essence of online gamers' perspective on social relationships. Specifically, a phenomenological analysis could be used to present narratives on personal identity, social interaction, and social conflict in both virtual and real-world contexts. Such research would not only elucidate the essence of online gamers' social experience, but provide a potential means of interpreting assessment criteria related to socialization for addiction.

Internet games have become a component of modern culture used to fulfill basic human needs for socialization and interpersonal interaction. It is essential for researchers to understand the social nature of online gaming in order to describe the full impact IGD can have on gamers' lived experiences in both virtual and real-world contexts. Researchers already recognize that gamers build meaningful relationships within their virtual worlds to compensate for loneliness and inadequacy in the real world (Allison et al., 2006; Wan & Chiou, 2006). Thus, some criteria used to assess for IGD, such as loss of interpersonal relationships (Allison et al., 2006), may not fully capture the experience of people such as online gamers. For instance, gamers who play Massively Multiplayer Online games (MMOs) and MMORPGs build meaningful social relationships and become members of gaming guilds that can act as social support systems (Young, 2009). Some researchers agree that experiences with addiction to the Internet, specifically social aspects of overplaying MMORPGs, might best be examined by exploring the unique experiences of individuals through a qualitative methodology (Israelashvili, Kim, & Bukobza, 2012).

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived social experiences of excessive online gamers. For the purpose of this study, excessive online gaming will be defined as playing at least 30 hours per week (as suggested by Chappell et al., 2006). The research questions that will drive this study are as follows: What is the social experience of excessive online gamers in virtual contexts? What is the social experience of excessive online gamers in real-world contexts?

Pilot Study Methodology

In order to obtain preliminary findings and provide support for the main study, a pilot study was conducted to explore the social experience of Internet gamers. Two participants were interviewed for the pilot study and an Internet gaming blog was examined. The researcher identified eight structural and 43 textural themes from these three data collections. The participants, data collection procedures, data analysis, and findings are discussed below.

Participants

Two participants who met the criteria of playing Internet games at least 30 hours per week were interviewed for the pilot study. The participants were recruited via convenience sampling due to the time restraints of the project.

Participant 101 was a 23-year-old Caucasian male. He was a college student who held a part-time job at a fast-food restaurant. He quit online gaming in an effort to improve himself roughly one year before the interview. When he used to play his game of choice, Lord of the Rings Online, he played up to 60 hours per week. His other primary Internet activities revolved around Facebook and Internet pornography. The primary researcher had never met this participant before the interview, but the research team member had a prior relationship with him.

Participant 102 was a 33-year-old Caucasian male. He worked as an analyst for the government and holds a master's degree in his field. He currently plays online games 30 hours per week. His other Internet activities included research for work, reading the news, and watching videos. The primary researcher had met this participant in person one time prior to the interview.

As an unobtrusive data method of collection, an anonymous and publicly available asynchronous support group blog for self-described Internet gaming addicts was examined. The bloggers are composed of online gamers who perceive that gaming has caused problems in their lives and functioning, as well as family members and friends of online gamers whose gaming is causing strain in those interpersonal relationships. Topics of posts include confessions and descriptions of problematic gaming, advice seeking for problematic playing, effects of problematic gaming on marriage and family life, descriptions of social interactions online, online infidelity through gaming, personal identity through gaming, the use and significance of avatars (characters representing the people playing the Internet game), and elements of Internet gaming addiction, including selfishness, inadequacy, relaxation, escape from the real world, and underlying mood and anxiety disorders. Triangulation of the data was performed in order to enrich the data on the social experience of Internet gamers and to increase internal validity of the findings. Blogs designed for self-identified Internet gaming addicts were chosen specifically to give voice to gamers who believe their gaming is problematic.

Data Collection

Two interviews were conducted using an interview protocol with 10 predetermined interview questions and probing follow-up questions designed to summarize understanding of the participants' responses. Sample interview questions included: What games do you play online that involve interaction with other players?

What are your relationships, if any, with online players? How important, if at all, is having virtual social relationships with others to you? What would other gamers tell me about you? How would you describe your physical world relationships? Each participant signed an informed consent document prior to the interview and completed a demographic sheet.

The unobtrusive data collection of the Internet gamer blog was identified from Google searches conducted on the following terms: Internet gaming, Internet gaming addiction, Internet gaming support, Internet gaming family. The postings by family members and friends of self-described Internet gaming addicts added to the depth of understanding of social interactions of Internet gamers. The data collection included a transcript of the first 70+ postings presented chronologically from most recent to least recent in 2013. Because this blog is public, not live, and anonymous, informed consent was not required.

Data Analysis

After each individual interview had been transcribed, the primary researcher conducted member checking with the participants by eliciting their feedback on the accuracy of the transcripts. With transcripts of each of the three data collections, the primary researcher used horizontalization to identify large domains in the texts, followed by structural and textural description in order to comprehend the meaning of the essence of the participants' and bloggers' experiences. The primary researcher created a case display and initial codebook after each data collection specific to each interview or blog. Three initial case displays and codebooks were thus produced.

The primary researcher then conducted consensus coding with her research team. The research team then used structural description to identify multiple potential meanings within the identified textural descriptions, as well as variations among themes within the three data collections. The research team developed second versions of the case displays and codebooks for the data collections. The primary researcher developed a final codebook compiling all three data collections to create a composite description of the essence of the social experience of the Internet gamers in the pilot study. The final codebook was used to recode the three data collections and examples and quotes were noted from each transcript.

Findings

The primary researcher identified eight structural and 43 textural codes in the pilot study data collections. Each of the 43 textural codes was defined according to its purpose and relation to the research questions. The textural codes can be collapsed into eight structural themes that drive the discussion and potential implications of the study. The five structural themes presented include family/friends, MMOs/MMORPGs, social interaction, social/personal identity, and addiction.

Family and Friends

The structural theme, *family/friends*, refers to the social interactions participants describe with the people closest to them. Several relevant conclusions can be drawn within the categories of this structural theme.

Lack of closeness. The textural code *lack of closeness* is defined as how gaming inhibits family social functioning. Gamers tend to ignore their families, causing strained relationships. Sometimes, gaming can be a commonly shared activity that brings family members together, but that closeness may not last when gaming is obsessive. A blogger explained,

> It has been 2 years since I unsubscribed to WoW. I have really missed it, there's no denying that. Games are still a big part of my life and my husband and I share them as a mutual hobby, so they will never be entirely out. We used to play WoW together, then I became much more obsessed and we had some really difficult times in our marriage.

Specific examples of lack of closeness from the data include gamers failing to share in childcare responsibilities, ignoring their spouses' requests for attention, and missing family meals. Participant 101 shared how his gaming impacted his family's dinner ritual:

> I know my relationship with my parents was hurting a little bit because I was missing dinner sometimes. It's like, when it's time to eat, I would be like, in a few seconds, and then before I realized it, I had skipped dinner.

Participant 101 indicated underlying strain in his relationship with his parents.

Inhibited social relationships. In terms of the structural code *friends*, the major conclusion is that gamers experience *inhibited social relationships*. They report an absence of real-world relationships and activities, often to the point of real-world relationships becoming nonexistent. A mother of an online gamer blogged about her son:

> Sigh. . . my son was/is the same way. Except now he is 22. He has no friends nearby, never goes out except to go to work (which he absolutely hates). It is all he likes and all he cares about.

When participant 101 was asked about his social life, he replied,

> Well, man, that's just pretty much all I did all day. Talk to people. I really didn't go anywhere from there. I didn't have any close friends, you know, outside of the computer and Internet. I mean, I occasionally saw my friends, but it was not deep at all.

The gamer is isolated because of the restriction of primarily communicating with people online.

MMOs/MMORPGs

The structural theme *MMOs/MMORPGs* indicates when gamers reference the game or specific elements of the game, which impact their social experience. The data from the pilot study suggest conclusions about the impact of guilds and the element of fantasy on the gamer's virtual social experience.

Guilds. When participants and bloggers refer to *guilds*, they are describing online social groups in which gamers work together to achieve game goals. Cooperation within these guilds requires social interaction, though often on a superficial level. Participants and bloggers often refer to the social drama occurring within their guilds. A blogger described the drama she experienced with a fellow gamer in her guild, having married him in the game with eventual divorce. "When he came back to the game, he was a

different person towards me. He left the guild I had joined to be there with him and joined another guild. Before I knew it, he was so distant, enjoying his time in his new guild and with new friends. He had no time for me. We had fights so many of them and finally we decided to divorce in game and go our separate ways." Guilds create an environment in which players develop close relationships, and these relationships present benefits and challenges similar to real world relationships.

Social Interaction

Social interaction is another structural theme in the data of the pilot study, as it described the nature of virtual social relationships that gamers experience.

Need for affirmation. Gamers' *need for affirmation* is defined as the importance to be known, to be famous, to have a reputation, or to be admired by others in the game. A blogger explained,

> I can tell you that the biggest addiction in the game is the confirmation and reinforcement that other players give you. When you defeat a boss or a dragon you gain positive reinforcement for doing your job. It is extremely satisfying and addicting, and it causes you to want to play more and receive more.

Participant 101 reinforced the importance of being popular and famous with the following comment: "Yeah I mean when I started out playing I loved to have fun, I loved the game. Then, when I got into the Moores, I led my first raid and it turned into like I am good at this game and I can be popular and I loved being popular a lot." The affirmation gamers receive from other players in the game significantly affects how they feel about themselves and how they feel toward the game.

Social and Personal Identity

Social and personal identity is a structural theme referring to how gamers view themselves in the game and in the real world. Pilot study findings indicated that gamers tend to feel a sense of personal inadequacy in the real world. The grandiosity they experience through their game play compensates for the real world inadequacy. As they indulge in the game to rebuild their egos, the game becomes an egocentric experience.

Inadequacy. The *inadequacy* Internet gamers describe in the pilot study is defined as sentiments of self-loathing and low self-esteem in social contexts, which has potentially led them to the gaming world. A blogger divulged,

> You ever think why some of us ran to video games to begin with? It's because we can't face reality. We can't face our inadequacies in life, the fact we just don't measure up, the fact that some things are just too painful to face.

In the game, gamers can become whomever they wish, shedding their inadequacies and recreating themselves in the form of avatars.

Egocentrism. To elaborate on the inadequacy Internet gamers tend to feel about themselves, the textural code of *egocentrism* is defined as the self-absorbing self-indulging aspect of Internet gaming that reinforces gamers' fantasies and their control over their self-image. Participants and bloggers in the pilot study referred to the fantasy world where they can be who they want to be. The fantasy often compensates for real-life insecurity. Participant 101 explained, "Cause I was in my own egocentric world, cause I could, I could umm. . . I could you know, be the fantasy that I wanted to be without

anyone else keeping me in check." A blogger described the negative consequences of such an egocentric activity. "It is an addiction. It won't ruin your life like drugs, but it will suck away your life. It makes people more impatient because it is so self-absorbing." This element of self-indulgence was a common theme in the pilot study data.

Grandiosity. The textural theme of *grandiosity* is defined in the pilot study as how the gamer aggrandizes himself with personal identity from the game and may apply it to real life. A blogger explained, "When I play a video game it is an escape from reality into a world I can not only control but thrive in. I can be important, have awesome skills and unlimited resources." Participant 102 described how he applied the personal identity he developed in the game to real life:

> I think I learned a lot about myself from having a leadership position with this group for a couple years and I think it encouraged me to take a bit of a stronger leadership role in my real life, in my job, because like I was getting a lot of feedback from these people that like hey you're doing a great job, can you step up and do more, and I was like, well, if these people respect me for that reason, I guess, I can, that should apply in my real life as well.

Some gamers may be able to apply their aggrandized personal identity to succeed in the real world, but others continue to use the game as an escape from real world all together.

Addiction

While some textural codes related to the structural code of *addiction* were prevalent in the pilot study data, including excessive play, preoccupation, compulsiveness, recovery, and co-morbidity, other elements associated with addiction have less support from the pilot study data, notably escape, cravings, relapse, and withdrawal.

Excessive play. *Excessive play* in the pilot study is defined as playing online for long periods of time, often with the same people. Participant 101 explained that his excessive play added up to a year's worth of his life. "I played [name of MMORPG] online for about four or five years. . . . There is a command on the game that can tell you how much time logged in, the minutes before I quit the game and deleted [P101 character name] it had been for over a year."

Preoccupation. In the pilot study, *preoccupation* is described as when gamers are obsessed with the game, thinking about it even when not playing. A blogger recounted her son's preoccupied behaviors over gaming:

> Does anyone else have experience with a child who is addicted? My son is only permitted to play 1.5 hours each weekend day and 1 hour on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and all he talks about and thinks about is the game. He spends all of his free time reading about the game, texting about the game, and on the computer working up stuff about the game. When he can't play or when his time is up he literally shakes and cries. He's 13! Much of his texting with his friends is complaining about how terrible his parents are because he can't play.

Participant 102 conveyed understanding of the "type of game where you get rewards thinking about it beyond when you're actually playing it."

Compulsiveness. In the pilot study, when gamers play *compulsively*, it refers to playing every day or every night, with loss of control over the time devoted to play. A

blogger referred to the conditioning an excessive Internet gamer may experience through gaming, contributing to the compulsiveness of the play. "Yes, genre plays a major role in addiction or compulsive behaviors. . . . Basically it conditions the player to play for a set amount of reward after playing for X amount of time."

Recovery. When gamers referred to *recovery* in the pilot study, they referenced quitting play or wanting to quit. They shared ways in which they have developed as people. Potential results pointed to how quitting the game contributed to personal growth and self-actualization, as well as increased real-world social functioning. Participant 101 shared his recovery story in depth. "My personal character growth increased cause I wasn't playing the game and I was away from my parents finally. Um, which I really needed to happen. But yeah I made friends." His self-image improved. "Yeah I like myself, yeah. . . yeah. It's not based on external locus of control, what you psychologists say. Yeah it's definitely, self actualization self realization." His real-world social functioning broadened. "Good, much deeper, satisfying, which I even have a girlfriend now." A blogger explained recovery from excessive Internet gaming in terms commonly associated with recovery from substance dependence. "I've learned that recovery is not for those who need it, but those who want it. Like the previous comment, I believe that the first step to recovery is accepting that one has an addiction."

Co-morbidity. Co-morbidity is a common textural code in the pilot study, defined as when gamers refer to co-morbid Internet addictions with other addictions, such as porn addiction, or when gamers refer to underlying mental health issues associated with the problematic gaming, including depression, anxiety, and adjustment problems. Participant 101 indicated co-morbidity with Internet porn addiction, as well as with depression and anxiety:

> Well, I guess on a more personal level, cause we are talking about addictions, I was a porn addict for like 10 years and I did that like if I was on the game and Facetime was an addiction as well.

He also shared information about his current mental health treatments. "And I am on meds, anxiety and depression, low dosage and counseling." Several bloggers also referred to co-morbidity with mood disorders. "I have depression and anxiety issues as well and play video games. I find the video games to be a great escape to get myself relaxed and they take my mind off what's making me anxious or depressed."

Discussion

Exploration of the social experience of Internet gamers in the pilot study provided information about social functioning in virtual worlds and the real world, social interaction in the game, and social identity. Participants and bloggers demonstrated reduced social functioning in the areas of family relations and friendships. Themes related to reduced closeness between excessive gamers and their family members. The literature supports the indication that reduced family functioning is a risk factor for Internet gaming overuse (Yen et al., 2009; Kim, Namkoong, Ku, & Kim, 2008). In addition, participants and bloggers appeared to have few real-world social interactions or a total absence of real-world friends. This conclusion is supported by the literature which points to decreased real-world social functioning among the population of identified problematic Internet gamers, including the absence of real-world relationships (Allison et

al., 2006). In terms of the social network in MMORPGs, the literature recognizes the necessity of social cooperation within guilds in order to function in the online game and even references the support system gamers can develop within their guilds (Young, 2009), but guild drama, as explored in the findings of the pilot study, is a topic unexplored by the literature thus far. Results about social functioning of participants were consistent with the literature.

The findings of the pilot study indicated support for potential negative consequences of excessive gaming already present in the literature, as well as potential risk factors. The findings related to fantasy were supported by the literature, which shows immersion in fantasy to be one of the social reasons gamers play and a potential risk factor for addiction to online games (Caplan, Williams, & Yee, 2009). Additionally, experiences participants and bloggers shared about their social interaction in the game indicated a strong need for affirmation, validation, and social recognition. The literature supports the findings of the pilot study citing that the need for empowerment and social recognition are primary reasons gamers engage in excessive play (Wan & Chiou, 2006). Participants described desires to maintain social interaction outside of the game with specific people. This finding from the pilot study was supported in the literature, as building virtual relationships is named as a reason for excessive online game play (Caplan et al., 2009; Ng & Wiener-Hastings, 2005). These results pointed to support for potential risk factors associated with excessive gaming such as low self-esteem, narcissistic personality traits, and disempowerment. Results about social and personal identity of gamers who participated in the pilot study showed feelings of inadequacy, egocentrism, and grandiosity to be associated with the social experience online. The literature also notes cases in which people create an ideal virtual identity to compensate for the inadequacy felt in the real world (Allison et al., 2006). The literature also suggests that narcissistic personality traits incline gamers to overuse (Kim et al., 2008).

Internet Gaming Disorder is currently under further research in Section 3 of the *DSM–5* (APA, 2013). The findings in the pilot study related to addiction supported the need for further research into the legitimacy of IGD as a mental health issue, diagnosable according to the *DSM–5*, regardless of the category into which the disorder may fall (i.e., impulse control or addictive disorder). Addiction is a controversial topic in the literature, as research shows that some individuals play Internet games excessively and share behavioral components of impulse control disorders (Shapira et al., 2000; Young, 2009), whereas other researchers purport the similarities to substance dependence (Griffiths, 2000; Young, 2009). The findings suggested the presence of criteria commonly associated with substance addiction, including excessive use, preoccupation, compulsive use, and reduced functioning in social relationships, work, and school. In the literature, devotion of time to the activity (i.e., as much as 16 hours daily) has been associated with IGD (Allison et al., 2006). Young (1999) included preoccupation with the Internet as a criterion for Internet addiction. More research is required to understand if excessive Internet gaming is related to impulse control disorders or if compulsive play is an element of an addiction. The literature has yet to focus on recovery from IGD, since it is still under further research as a legitimate mental health issue. Criteria such as escape, cravings, relapse, and withdrawal, though present in the pilot study data, appeared primarily in data collected from bloggers and were not directly stated in data from interviewed participants. The literature shows a relationship between IGD and psychiatric

issues, including depression (Peng & Liu, 2010, van Rooij et al., 2011; Yen et al., 2009) and suicidal ideations (Rehbein et al., 2010). It is still unclear in the literature and in the pilot study if psychiatric issues are a risk factor or cause of excessive Internet gaming, or both. Further research, including studies with theoretical frameworks more geared toward addiction, may more deeply explore these criteria commonly associated with clinical substance dependence.

Limitations and Ethical Considerations

This pilot study has several limitations related to dependability. Small sampling size limited the depth of exploration of the social experience of Internet gamers. Two individual interviews and postings from multiple bloggers may not be sufficient to gain an in-depth description of online social experiences. Convenience sampling may have also limited the transferability of the study. Both participants were Caucasian males, limiting the cultural and gender-related scope of the study. The literature indicates that males are more likely than females to have an Internet-related addiction; however, female Internet gamers are an underrepresented population in the literature. Researcher relationships with the participants may have impacted their responses in the interviews. The research team member had a social relationship with one participant, and the primary researcher had met the other participant in a social setting once before the interview. These relationships may have also impacted how each researcher coded data from the interviews. Last, the nature of the blog used as an unobtrusive data collection may have skewed results, as it is purported as a blog for people with "addiction" to Internet gaming. Any language related to addiction that bloggers expressed in their postings may not have emerged in an interview with more generalized questions about Internet gaming social experience. It is also important to note that use of a blog in a published research study requires ethical considerations. Although the blog is public and anonymous, bloggers have not given their expressed permission for their posts to be studied, copied, printed, or published.

Professional Implications

The potential of this pilot study to contribute to the field of counseling is promising, as evidenced by the support in the literature for the findings presented. In addition, the study emphasized the voices of Internet gamers and reported their social experiences online and in the real world. It is a step in the direction toward a deeper understanding of how Internet gamers experience social interaction online and offline and how they perceive their own social identities and social functioning. This study has significant professional implications for diagnosis and treatment in the mental health field. It supports continued research into the legitimacy of excessive Internet gaming as a mental health issue so that professionals can understand the risk factors, develop assessment criteria, and implement research-based prevention and treatment. Last, a larger scale phenomenological inquiry could be utilized to further understand the lived experience of Internet gamers, and then a grounded theory could be used to develop the first steps toward a potential diagnostic criteria for Internet gaming addiction.

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Note: This paper is part of the annual VISTAS project sponsored by the American Counseling Association. Find more information on the project at: http://www.counseling.org/knowledge-center/vistas