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Identity of Pokemon Go Players: How Social Gaming Affects Behavior

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<p style="text-align:center">Identity of Pokemon Go Players: How Social Gaming Affects Behavior</p>

In July of 2016 Americans have received a fun new app that produces behaviors unlike any before. It causes people to gather at places, such as parks, in large groups, or causes them to wander around neighborhoods. Pokemon Go is an augmented reality game created by the company Niantic, and is available for free on mobile phones. An article From USA Today features the parks and recreation director of Kimberly Point Park, Michael Kading who says "I have never seen anything like this" as he has trouble getting people out of the park at closing time. The app has caused a bit of controversy as many stories related to Pokemon Go appeared on the news just a few days after its release. The CNN reports that four armed men used a feature in the game called a PokeStop to rob people by luring unwitting players.[1] Another story by this CNN article reports that a girl discovered a dead body in the river under Wyoming's Big Wind River highway bridge.[1] The girl admits "I probably would have never went down there if it weren't for this game". In Massachusetts, Boon Sheridan's own home was turned into a Pokemon gym.[1] These Pokemon gyms entourage teams of players to battle against one another at that location. Sheridan watched as people would gather in his garden or block his driveway with their cars. He found this experience amusing, and has been tweeting about it whenever he meets a new player in his yard, but many other owners of private property have found trespassers a nuisance. What these news stories have in common is that ordinary people go to abnormal places in order to catch Pokemon or battle gyms in the game. This game seems to have created a shift in

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[1] Clara Lindh, "What Pokémon GO has to do with armed robbery and a dead body," CNN. July 11, 2016

priorities that is giving people motivation to do things they wouldn't ordinarily do. People who

would ordinarily sit in their rooms for hours at a time suddenly get to motivation to walk, jog,

bike, or partake in any form of exercise in order to hatch Pokemon eggs. People who ordinarily

care for self preservation would be willing to walk through a sketchy neighborhood in order to

reach a Pokemon lure. People who ordinarily are shy around strangers will meet other Pokemon

Go players and strike up a conversation that might even lead to a new friendship, especially if

they are on the same team. The excitement of the game combined with the interactions within a

community of players creates a new and fun experience for anyone playing.

        This app is just one example of how a game can affect the dynamics of communities.

Games of all varieties have been a fascinating pastime for centuries. The people of ancient

Greece created the Olympics to create a friendly competition which would inspire communities

of people to gather in order to show support for their own kind. Sports exist today in many

forms, and some would argue that video games are included. Video games have created a

community in which all members can participate and support the ones they identify with. I will

argue that playing video games which encourage social interactions, such as Pokemon Go,

creates a sense of identity which can affect the choices and behavior of the player in positive or

negative ways. I will discuss the positive outcomes which include community building as a result

of developing identity, as well as the negative behavioral changes which may lead to personal

loss. Depending on the awareness of a player, they can make choices which benefit them, or be

manipulated into benefiting others.

        In order to understand choice and behavior, one must understand how identity affects a

person. Identity by definition is "the qualities, beliefs, etc., that make a particular person or group

different from others" and is what directs people to be who they are.[2] People can use Identity to

answer questions such as "Who am I?" or "What do I like?" or "What should I do?" Identity is

strengthened when information is turned into empathetic emotion. It is also what shapes a

person's attitudes, as it is a motivation for behavior in itself. Jonathan Cohen has analyzed the

factors which are strongly tied to the development of identity, which are the people and media

we are exposed to as young developing people.[3] Particularly, characters in media such as

television or video games can be characters we come to identify with. In addition, it is found that

our school identification is important to self definition. The peers we spend time with on a sports

team, or the peers we learn with or play games with become a part of our identity. When finding

others people and a unifying reason to cooperate, people develop team identity.

The components of team identity are cognition, emotion, and behavior.[4] The first

component, cognitive alignment, refers to each individual in a team understanding the common

goal or purpose for which a team works toward.[5] Emotional alignment develops as the team

practices communication among its members. Behavioral alignment is achieved when the team

coordinates its actions toward a goal, and each individual puts the needs of the team before their

own needs. Notably in sports, teams are encouraged to work on improving communication and

improving their own skills for the good of the team. I have not been on a sports team myself, but

I was in a high school marching band for four years. I can say that it is quite a commitment that

[2] Merriam-Webster's Learner's Dictionary, s.v. "Identity," accessed Aug 30, 2016, http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/identity.

[3] Cohen, Jonathan, "Defining Identification: A theoretical look at the identification of audiences with media characters", *Mass Communication and Society* (2001): 4, 245-264.

[4] Griffiths, Robert, Matthew Eastin, and Vincent Cicchrillo, "Competitive Video Game Play: An Investigation of Identification and Competition," *Communication Research* 43(4) (2016): 468-486.

[5] Firoe, Stephen, Michael P. Letsky, *Theories of Team Cognition: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives* (Taylor & Francis 2012), 560.

quickly builds a sense of unity among the members. Each of us put in our time and energy to carefully coordinate our actions. Over time, we become aware of each others' strengths, weaknesses, and even emotions. Our annual competitions were similar to a social game in which we coordinate actions to achieve an end goal. Winning as a team can be a very rewarding experience when done with the peers I have grown so close to, and have come to identify with. In a video game, the phenomena of players finding identity as a part of the video game involves "individuals adopting the goals of their character and connecting with their emotions and motivations" as described by Cohen. [6] In any social activity this is important, and video games require all the attention, skill, and the ability to identify with teammates, as other types of team games do.

The idea of Pokemon Go creating teams within the game is interesting because, like sports, it creates both an element of competition, and an identity for the player to associate with. There are also personal incentives which encourage the behaviors of people, but the social incentives will be the main focus. This social component of team identity, and the personal components that drive incentive can be used to either motivate or manipulate groups of people in positive or negative ways. These factors can influence Pokemon Go players to make personal sacrifices for their team in the game, even if the sacrifice does not seem necessary. From a biological perspective, preserving and improving oneself is what any organism does to survive. A single person has self-oriented goals which motivate their actions. However, it is a known biological phenomena that when a person finds that they can identify with another, the tendency to behave altruistically develops and they will promote the survival of one of their own. Even when survival is not situationally an issue, the desire to support is extended to a member of a

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[6] 3 Cohen, Jonathan, "Defining Identification: A theoretical look at the identification of audiences with media characters", *Mass Communication and Society* (2001): 4, 245-264.

group one may identify with. In a study done by Anna Szuster, factors were found which lead to favorable attitudes toward other people.[7] The environment, social norms, morality, and other factors led to the understanding of perspective and acceptance of the values of other people. This acceptance and understanding prompts engagement in order to help and support the development of others. Through exposure to one's ingroup, one becomes emotionally attached to the ingroup. One's way of thinking changes to reflect the needs and standards of the group. This article shows that people will want to act in a way that aids or supports those they identify with. A Pokemon Go player will chose one of three teams of different colors, and will identify with and support their teams by battling in gyms, or even announcing it to people they meet.

The choosing of a color is a very basic way to form identity, as visual distinction between groups is one of the most common forms of segregation. Since humans are beings which rely primarily on eyesight to make distinctions, it is no wonder that judgements based on color are prevalent today. Racism is prevalent today, and preferences of people for others can be arbitrarily affected by the perception of skin color. In order to understand what this has to do with identity, Morgan Maxwell et al. surveyed various people to find correlation between perceived skin tone, racial identity, and skin tone satisfaction or preference.[8] It was found that there was no significant preference for a particular skin color. However, it was found that people whom had high satisfaction for their own skin color also believed they had a mutually high private regard within their ingroup. That is to say that those whom strongly identify with their

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[7] Szuster, Anna. "Crucial Dimensions of Human Altruism. Affective vs. Conceptual Factors Leading to Helping or Reinforcing Others," *Frontiers in Psychology* 519 (2016): 1664-1078, Accessed August 22, 2016. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00519

[8] Maxwell, Morgan, Joshua Brevard, Jasmine Abrams, and Faye Belgrave. "What's color got to do with it? Skin color, skin color satisfaction, racial identity, and internalized **racism** among African American college students." Journal of Black Psychology 41(5) (2015): 438-61. Accessed August 1, 2016. doi: 10.1177/0095798414542299

own color tend to find preference for their own color and are more eager to form community with such a group of people. Whether it is skin color among people, or team colors in a game, people prefer to support their own. I have personally observed people in Pokemon Go showing support for their team in the way that groups of players shout the name of their team, battle together at gyms, or spend money to put lures on PokeStops. I have also seen my own peers show preference and support for their own colors by purchasing the colors and logos of their teams on t-shirts. Their tendency to show support for their team extended beyond the gameplay to competing in the real world to see who could buy more items related to their team color. In my brief visit to Honolulu's Comic Con I also participated in a contest in which a booth tallied the number of items sold to each Pokemon Go team. This concept of competition can also be extended to all kinds of games, including sports, in which people cheer for or give money to teams they like.

Sports fans naturally identify strongly with their preferred teams. According to *Sports Fans, Identity, and Socialization: Exploring the Fandemonium*, it is important to a fan that they feel the players are "like them" because the team represents the lifestyle of the people they are associated with.[9] In addition, the feeling of competition between teams became a competition between viewers by extension of identification. When interviewed, many viewers would say that watching their favorite teams or players win would create a sense of personal achievement in themselves. The success, failure, and sense of pride is experienced by sports fans as a result of competition. Now that I have established the significance of team identity, I will discuss the behavioral consequences that result.

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[9] Earnheardt, Adam, Pauk Haridakis, and Barbara Hugenberg, Sports fans, identity, and socialization: exploring the fandemonium. Lexington Books, 2012.

Humans are both social and competitive by nature. Identifying with a group to set oneself apart from others and compete against others is something that most people tend to do. A study in 2013 features an experiment based on the premise that competition is the main component of gaming. The article on competitive video game play studies how the outcome of a game can be affected by a player's identification with their own team, and how they feel about their opponents. [10] It was hypothesized that positive out comes (such as enjoyment) or negative outcomes (such as aggression) may arise. "A(n)…experimental design was invoked to study the effects of opponent saliency, team identification, and the competitive outcome of a win or loss." Results indicate that competitiveness was significantly related to both enjoyment and hostility. Furthermore, data suggest a significant interaction between identification and competitive outcomes on hostility." The data finds that hostility is affected by competition and competitive outcomes. In addition it finds that identification with one's team greatly impacted the gaming experience. The outcomes of the competition are suggested to be improved with positive team identification. This shows that video games can generate positive or negative effects around their community, such as helping one's own team win, or becoming hostile to opponents.

The article "From Outgroups to Allied Forces" shows that competition is what facilitates the development of aggression in participants of video games, sports, or gambling.[11] It was commonly conceived that the content of video games affects personality aspects, such as degree of violence, in players. Violence and negative attitudes have been more strongly correlated to

[10] Adachi, Paul, Teena Willoughby, "Demolishing the Competition: The Longitudinal Link Between Competitive Video Games, Competitive Gambling, and Aggression,"*Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 42(7) (2013): 1090-104

[11] Adachi, Paul, Gordon Hodson, Teena Willoughby, Carolyn Blank, Alexandra Ha, "From Outgroups to Allied Forces: Effect of Intergroup Cooperation in Violent and Nonviolent Video Games on Boosting Favorable Outgroup Attitudes," *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 145(3) (2016): 259-265.

competitive games and competitive gambling, rather than violent games. Participants were also observed to have an improved attitude toward outgroup members when playing cooperatively rather than in solo play. This article shows that positive attitudes and better cooperation can result from playing games with others. It also shows that violent video games are not necessarily causes of negative attitudes or violence, however the existence of competition may facilitate the tendency to become violent. There have been many documented cases of kids developing tendency toward violent behavior in video games other than the results of this study. It is known that social cooperative games can cause tantrums or aggressive behavior in some people. There is an abundance of videos on YouTube which exemplify the release of aggression when playing cooperative games.[12] When playing in a safe and neutral environment, with proper guidance, it can be assumed that a child playing video games will not develop. However, one's environment is not always controlled. Sometimes people may find a community to identify with on the streets as opposed to in a game.

When one has a reason to identify with a community, one will also feel obligated to defend, or even fight for it. This strong sense of loyalty to a community may be one of the reasons that people engage in gang related violence. Although Pokemon does not encourage violence, or gang activity, I have noticed several similarities to some gang-like qualities. People both playing Pokemon Go and participating in gangs will 1) have a color that indicates whom they identify with 2) fight rival members, although not necessarily violently in Pokemon, and 3) gain territory in real-world spaces to expand upon their own group. As a result of identifying with one's own group, people are also willing to make sacrifices. In Pokemon Go, these

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[12] Fuleup. "Call of Duty: Greatest Freak Out Ever". YouTube video, 3:59. Posted [June 18, 2011]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FAY6HsfEL7E.
This video shows example of a young person displaying aggressive behavior toward his peers while playing a cooperative video game. This may contain some explicit language.

sacrifices might include the time one takes in order to help a friend battle a gym, or the money one spends on gaining resources in the game. In a gang, the sacrifices can be as great as putting one's life on the line to fight for a gang.

The appeal of joining a gang is found to be rooted in the community it offers its members.[13] Children between the ages of 13-18 are at highest risk for seeking gang involvement then there is evidence that their family or peer community is unstable. When studying the rationale of young boys joining gangs, it is found that some of the primary reasons include social acceptance, opportunity for release of frustration, to gain status or respect from community members through intimidation, to have fun committing delinquent acts with like-minded peers, and to "act out" frustrations in the form of violence.[14] These reasons are similar to players of Pokemon Go in that players can find people with common interests in a socially accepting environment which they generate. Instead of acting out frustrations through the physical environment, they use the digital environment to battle and raise their team's status. I personally have no interest in joining gangs, but I can imagine the excitement and appeal of doing unusual activities with my peers. While playing Pokemon Go with my friends, we would wander about our neighborhood to gyms claimed by other teams. The idea of leaving our mark on various locations was exciting. The places we would go were exciting as well, because often it felt like we were going to areas that perhaps only delinquents would go. One gym was a cemetery, another was a mural in an alley, and we even found one on a highway overpass. All the while we were fighting the Pokemon which belonged to other people, which was an exciting bonding

[13] Aasheim, Lisa Langfuss. "'I am Somebody': Gang Membership." In *Youth at Risk: A Prevention Resource for Counselors, Teachers, and Parents (6th ed.),* edited by David Capuzzi, and Douglas Gross, 291-317. Virginia, US: American Counseling Association, 2014.
[14] Taylor, S. Stanley. "Why American boys join street gangs," *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology* 5(8) (2013): 339-349

experience for all of us. Pokemon Go players do not need to worry about bodily harm as much as gang members do, but there are a few things for which they should be cautious. Although some players may not realize it, playing a game can be a commitment, and wanting to improve can come at a cost.

A gang may manipulate its members into engaging in questionable behavior, such as selling drugs. Pokemon Go is not so evil as to do this, but they are capable of manipulating players into paying money. The creation of teams in the game is what gets people to participate in battles. Battling can quickly drain resources, and requires strong Pokemon, which can make people more than eager to make a few in-app purchases. This is the strategy of freemium gaming, in which developers give players incentive to spend money on in-game items that cannot be quickly acquired. By placing limits on the game, companies can give players the option to pay in order to make the game better. Many freemium strategies are observable in Pokemon Go.[15] One strategy is to give a small amount free offerings to players, which inclines them to pay for more when they exhaust their resources. For example there is a limit on the amount of items or Pokemon a player can own, and the only way to upgrade the limit is through purchase with virtual currency. Ordinarily a payer would be able to play the game without need or desire to spend money. However, a player whom passionately identifies as a master of Pokemon Go is willing to pay for the resources that improve the game experience.

In addition to using a person's identity as a member of their own team, Niantic uses the desire of people to identify as a good Pokemon trainer. With competition being such a

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[15] Kumar Vineet, "Making Freemium work" Harvard Business Review (2014)
Freemium programs use a strategy in which consumers are allowed a limited supply of features in the program. The trick is to allow enough of the resource to the point where a user is accustomed to using it, but less than the user would feel is ideal. When balanced correctly, users feel inclined to buy more.

fundamental part of Pokemon gameplay, it is no wonder that people want to be the very best like no one ever was. When it comes down to it, people have the desire to identify as the best they can be, and if they identify as a member of a group, they would also what to represent the group as the best it can be too, and seek to improve themselves and their team. The gaming company can use the urge of people to compete and improve to make a successful game. Although the word "manipulation" has some negative connotation, this spirit of self improvement can show it has positive effects. Manipulating people to improve upon themselves is not an entirely bad thing, as it will better their skills. Pokemon Go encouraging people to play the game has led to an increase in exercise, and friendly social interaction.

The studies previously discussed show not only the negative sides of social gaming, but also that social games can improve attitudes toward others, and can also theoretically aid a community. An example of improved attitude is found in a first hand experience posted in a story on Tumblr.[16] The author states "I was in Norfolk today, going out to lunch with some family and while we were eating I took out my phone to check Pokemon Go and the waitress saw. I asked her what team she was on and we were both Mystics! We high-fived and then talked about Pokemon for a little bit….I got to see almost 100 people playing together and chatting. Around the back of the garden there was a little booth set up with a Pokemon sign that was selling pastries, for the people playing, all profits went to the upkeep of the garden (they were also the ones putting the lures out.) It was so cool to see so many people playing at the same time. It's amazing that an app can bring so many people together." This patron was able to see the community gather together peacefully and happily around a common interest. It is implied that this phenomenon would not happen without the social game which ties the events together.

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[16] aqsparkle posted Jul 25, 2016, "PokemonGoStories," accessed August 19, 2016, http://pokemongostories.tumblr.com/page/3

In another story, real evidence of Pokemon Go aiding the community was found in Arizona where the mother of a 15 year old boy with Autism received overwhelming support from a community of Pokemon Go players.[17] As a recent victim of bullying, her son, named Ty, would find joy in few things other than his family, and Pokemon Go. After members of the community heard about his struggle, they organized a day dedicated to autism awareness, and catching Pokemon with Ty. The community was able to identify with Ty on levels that extended past video games. They acknowledged that acceptance is important when it comes to meeting good new people with similar interests.

Competitive video games reflect that people can find many ways to connect with one another. We as people possess the basic instincts to identify with people, help those identify with, compete against those we find to be different, and improve ourselves. It is important that we are able to have these qualities and be able to interact with each other in a healthy and constructive way. Building a good and healthy sense of community is probably the best way to achieve positive interactions. Since behavior is so dependent on an individual's identity, cooperative behavior is ideal when prioritizing the progression of a community. As seen in the studies on competitive games, one's identity with the community can affect the success of a community. Behavior which promotes those we identify with can be achieved with teamwork and understanding. People who at first seem different can find something in common which can turn them from multiple individuals into a functioning team. This mentality can be started young, by teaching proper attitude toward social games. The identity which one finds in a community developed through game can guide them to aid others. These behaviors are not only oriented toward the community, but to the individual themselves. Self improvement and positive attitude

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[17] Nañez, Dianna, "How the internet responded after an autistic Pokemon player was bullied at Tempe Town Lake is a thing of beauty," *The Republic* (2016)

toward oneself and one's identity can also be developed through concepts introduced in social gaming. Unfortunately, it can also lead to bad decisions, or negative behavior. The desire to compete and play social games could become a medium of directing anger. The desire to find community could potentially be directed toward the wrong types of people, such as those in a gang. The desire to support and sacrifice for the teams we identify with may just be a scam in which companies use identity against their own consumers. The changes in behavior which the community of Pokemon Go players have been interesting to observe. This app has given people reason to become bold in interacting with their environment, building their community, and improving themselves (whether it be their skills in the game, or their health by walking). It is thanks to the new identity they have found as Pokemon Go trainers, and hopefully positive changes will continue to arise in the future.

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