

**THEORIZING VRCHAT: A COMPREHENSIVE VIEW OF THE LEBANESE GAMER
IN THE VIRTUAL REALM**

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Studies: Advertising

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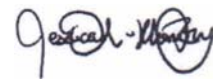
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Abstract

This paper studies concepts from the uses and gratifications theory and gender theory amongst Lebanese VRChat players. It studies the concepts of catharsis, diversion, social utility, vicarious experience, and escapism, as well as the male gaze, gender identity, ego ideals, and toxic masculinity. The thesis objective is to determine the transcendence of the mentioned concepts into the virtual gaming world among Lebanese video gamers. The research was conducted qualitatively through semi-structured in-depth interviews as well as participant observation to further verify the obtained data. Findings show that the mentioned theoretical concepts cement themselves in the online world for various reasons as explained by the respondents throughout the thesis.

1. Introduction

In the modern world, technology is ever-evolving. From the simplest of computer games in the 1960's to the omnipresence of the internet, technology has risen to another level in its latest innovation: Virtual reality. Virtual reality is a technology that enhances life in all aspects. It allows people to feel what their physical bodies are unable to experience. Within a realm of virtual reality, people can travel, run, fly, and untether from the boundaries of their realities. Virtual reality is a rapidly emerging technology, bearing a fruitful platform for researchers to explore and expand on theoretical frameworks found in literature, such as the uses and gratifications theory, and gender theory.

VRChat is an immersive virtual reality social platform that allows users to interact with other 3D characters, or avatars, in real time. This research focuses on local Lebanese VRChat players, using qualitative methods to deeply understand their motivations and reasons behind playing. This thesis is a unique addition to literature, as it studies an online multiplayer videogame, VRChat, which has not been studied before within the shoes of a Lebanese video gamer. This thesis examines the uses and gratifications obtained through VRChat, while also studying the transcendence of the male gaze, ego ideals, toxic masculinity, and gender identity in the virtual world.

2. Literature Review

This section of the paper deals with the literature review. It first looks at a general overview of the online gaming world followed by an introduction of the main game discussed which is VRChat. A series of academic articles then discuss the uses and gratifications of online gaming as well as gender in gaming. A brief criticism and personal perspective are provided towards the end of the discussed articles.

2.1 The Grand Scheme of Gaming

Riad Chikhani (2015), an author representing TechCrunch, brings to view the offline side of video gaming, in his article titled “The History of Gaming: An Evolving Community.” Chikhani begins by explaining that ever since its commercial birth in the 1950s as a technological oddity at a science fair, gaming has blossomed into one of the most profitable entertainment industries in the world. The first recognized example of a game machine was revealed by Dr. Edward Uhler Condon at the New York World’s Fair in 1940 (Chikhani, 2015). The game was based on the ancient mathematical game of *Nim* and was played around 50,000 times by people during its 6 months on display, with the computer reportedly winning 90% of the games. However, despite the introduction of this machine, the first game system designed for commercial home use did not emerge until nearly three decades later, when Ralph Bayer released his prototype gaming machine called the “Brown Box”, in 1967 (Chikhani, 2015). The “Brown Box” was a vacuum tube-circuit that could be connected to a television set and allowed two users to control virtual cubes that chased each other on the television screen. The article further states that the “Brown Box” could be programmed to play a variety of games, including ping pong, checkers, and four sports games. Chikhani explains that due to mismanaged marketing campaigns, the “Brown Box” was eventually discontinued in 1972, and superseding it was the Atari gaming console, which quickly became the

first gaming company to really set the benchmark for a large-scale gaming community. Atari not only developed their games in-house, the article states, but also created a whole new industry around the arcade category. In 1973, with a starting price of \$1,095, Atari began to sell the first real electronic videogame Pong, and arcade machines began emerging in bars, bowling allies, and shopping malls around the world, setting the preliminary stages for the now modern gaming industry.

Author Chris Baker from the news website Wired builds on Chikhani's description of the beginning stages of offline gaming by introducing readers to the online margin of video gaming. Unlike regular offline gaming in which an individual enjoys their time playing games without the interference of online gaming partners or the need for an internet connection, online games demand the usage of some form of computer network which in most cases mainly exists through internet connection. As previously mentioned, the first offline computer game was initially introduced in 1940 at the World's Fair through a computer called the "-Nimtron-" which allowed people to play the mathematical game of "Nim" (Baker, 2010). Yet, it wasn't until the late 1960s that the world was introduced to host-based networks and time-sharing. A host-based game occurs when an individual with an internet connection volunteers to become the central computer to which all other players connect. The central computer acts as a server to which a specific amount of people belongs. If the central computer were to lose its internet connection, the whole server would crash. This formation of a group of players playing in one server from different areas of the world through internet connection is what represents online gaming (Baker, 2010). Despite its slow start in the early 1960s, nowadays the online gaming industry is one of the largest economic sectors in the world, attracting a diverse audience and bringing in billions of dollars in revenue.

The article titled “US Video Gaming Industry in 2021: Gaming Devices and Video Game Content Viewership trends” by author Joey Hadden (2021) on the popular platform *News Insider* claims that gaming usage and viewership of gaming video content has spiked in 2020 and will continue to do so throughout 2023. According to Hadden (2021), the number of gamers who spent their time on digital consoles like Nintendo consoles, PlayStations, and Xboxes, increased by 6.3% since 2019. Despite the rise of gaming consoles in early 2020, the return to in-person work, school, and other real-life events have caused this bump to plateau. The article mentions further that despite this increase, mobile phones remain the most popular gaming device by a huge margin, claiming that there will be more than 150million monthly mobile gamers in the United States by the end of 2021, amounting to over 89% of all digital gamers. The convenience of mobile gives it a leg up on all other gaming technologies simply because gamers can play on their device anywhere at any time, which is a quality that laptops and game consoles lack. Nevertheless, other gaming platforms that serve as a medium between convenient mobile gaming technology and more advanced console systems are the laptop and PC devices. The article states that there will be over 98 million monthly desktop/laptop gamers in the US in 2021. Even though this percentage represents a slight decrease from 2020, it still amounts to more than half off all digital gamers. With regards to gaming video content, Hadden claims that hunger for social interaction in 2020 increased the demand for game streaming, where consumers could communicate with gaming influencers and online gaming streamers. Hadden estimates that gaming video content will gain more than 4 million monthly viewers by 2023 through live stream services. *Twitch* is currently the most dominant platform for gaming video content worldwide in Q4 2020, with 65.8% of total hours watched, compared to the 23.3% for YouTube Gaming and 10.9% for Facebook Gaming. The article also speaks about E-sports, or internet sports, defining it as organized gaming

competitions among professional players and teams. While in-person sporting events were delayed for months due to the pandemic, E-Sports continued with online tournaments, allowing it to gain media coverage and viewers. Overall, there will be more than 26 million monthly US E-sports viewers in 2021, amounting to over 47% of all gaming video content viewers. With regards to the video gaming industry, Hadden claims that the gaming market revenue is well-positioned due to the massive bump in monthly digital gamers, for in 2020 alone, customers spent a massive \$44 billion in gaming software and services. Hadden concludes his article by stating that one element of gaming that will remain important in 2021 is the ability to provide social interaction in a virtual way. The reasoning for this statement is that as the pandemic subsides, the number of online gamers may recede, but it is the social element of gaming that will continue to attract a large audience towards the gaming ecosystem throughout 2021 and beyond.

2.2 Gratifications of Online Gaming

The article titled “The Benefits of Playing Video Games” by authors Isabela Granic, Adam Lobel, and Rutger Engels published (January 2014) claims that video games provide benefits in four main domains: cognitive, motivational, emotional, and social. Starting with the cognitive benefits, contrary to popular belief, this research indicates that playing games promotes a wide range of cognitive skills (Granic, 2014). This is particularly true for shooter games, such as “Halo” or “Call of Duty”. Numerous experiments were conducted to provide convincing evidence for these statements such as the use of the methodology known as fMRI, or functional magnetic resonance imaging. One of the experiments involved assigning naïve gamers, or gamers who have not had experience in gaming, to play a shooting game for a limited period of time. After the duration, these participants immediately began to portray signs of increased accuracy in attention allocation, as well as a higher spatial resolution in visual processing, and enhanced mental rotation

abilities. The article also adds that the spatial skills improvements derived from playing commercially available shooter games are even comparable to the effects of formal high-school and university level courses which aim to enhance the same skills. The article identified several motivational benefits of video games that seem to promote an effective motivational style both in and outside gaming contexts. The article explains that children develop beliefs about their intelligence which are brought to light by specific motivational styles whilst completing an achievement. To be more specific, children who are praised for their effort (e.g., “You worked hard on that puzzle!”) develop an incremental theory of intelligence, which is an intelligence believed to be malleable and able to be cultivated and improved through effort and time. The article proposes that video games are an ideal training ground for incremental intelligence since they provide players with immediate feedback when completing their quests. To illustrate, points or coins earned while playing through a game serve to reward continual effort and thus provide players with the motivation to gain more of these points. In order to apply these findings to real life, the article explains that incremental intelligence is a good method to gauge whether individuals in challenging circumstances will persist or give up, and the ways in which they will deal with failure. In addition to motivational benefits, the article also examines emotional benefits. It uses the uses and gratifications theory to explain that one of the main benefits for taking part in video games is to manage the players’ state of mind and enhance their emotional well-being. It further explains that several studies have been conducted to correlate playing preferred video games with an improved mood or increase in positive emotion. Puzzle games, for instance, are able to enhance one’s mood as well as promote relaxation, and ward off anxiety. The article also highlights the importance of experiencing positive emotions on a daily basis such as enabling individuals to build social relationships that provide support for goal pursuit and failure, as well

as undoing the detrimental and de-motivating results of negative emotions. Finally, the article discusses the social benefits of gaming. It explains that against popular belief, the average gamer is not socially isolated since over 70% of gamers play with their friends cooperatively or competitively. Through the course of gaming, players obtain important prosocial skills when they play games that are specifically designed to reward effective cooperation, support, and helping behaviors. To be more specific, children who took part in prosocial games exhibited improvements in their behaviors, such as being more helpful and generous. Add to that, individuals gaming together, cooperatively or competitively, manifest their social skills in forms of civic engagement, such as their ability to organize groups and lead like-minded people in social causes. The article does a great job at discussing the different gratifications obtained by playing online; however certain points were made by the author that are rather debatable like the concept of neglecting the existence of isolation, and the certainty of obtaining prosocial skills. I could argue that regardless of the amount of time one spends playing with their friends, they could still maintain a lingering feeling of loneliness and isolation due to existing issues such as depression or anxiety. In addition, one may be able to express themselves when behind a mask, which in this case is a computer microphone, but may face issues communicating with peers in real life scenarios.

Unfortunately, it is also important to discuss the negative effects of online gaming.. The first of these effects is aggressive behavior. Most players want to achieve their main goal while playing, and this is usually done through achieving victory (Granic, 2014). However, when players are not capable of doing so, they achieve a certain amount of frustration that may lead to somewhat aggressive behavior, such as cussing through a microphone or breaking a controller. On a more psychological level, players who have already encountered such aggression are more likely to cope in a similar manner whilst facing real life dilemmas and even in human interactions. In addition,

another negative effect of online gaming is loneliness. Gamers who spend much or most of their time playing online games cannot spend significant time with their family and friends, which results in them distancing themselves from social interaction which is an integral part of human nature. Another negative effect would be the educating of wrong values to fellow gamers. Many online games depict women to be weaker or sexually provocative characters while the male characters are the dominant and integral part of the adventure. This phenomenon, especially in young children, may influence the way in which women must be treated in addition to other values that may have been distorted.

Moving on from the formation of wrong values, online video games may induce a negative impact on one's health. To be more specific, health issues include the besmirching of one's sleeping cycle which in turn causes a hefty amount of fatigue, depression, degradation of immunity, and neural damage. Also, excessive amounts of gaming leads to a lack of fitness due to players forgetting to eat, or over-eating while gaming as well as the omission of one's will to go work out. Last but not least, one more negative effect that excessive amounts of online gaming hours may lead to is bad academic performance. The more people spend time playing video games due to addiction, the less likely they are to commit time to academic assignments, and thus the more likely they are to end up with poor academic results. As mentioned above, lack of sleep may also cause a lessening in the amount time one can remain concentrated on a certain activity such as class explanations, which will also lead to failed exams and other assignments.

Building on the findings of Granic, the article "Video Game Uses and Gratifications as Predictors of Use and Game Preference" by John L. Sherry, Kristen Lucas, Bradley S. GreenBerg, and Ken Lachlan (January 1, 2016) goes more in depth on the motivations behind gaming. Through the uses and gratifications lens, the article explores the reasons that motivate individuals to use

video games and shows how these motivations are translated into genre preferences and amount of time devoted to gameplay. The article conducted two studies. The first study sought to establish an empirical set of traits that explain what drives an individual to play. The study was conducted on 18-22-year-old American undergraduate participants in a series of focus groups; these participants also had to have at least somewhat of a background in gaming (Lucas, 2014). The methodology used was focus groups as well as a short survey consisting of 96 participants that was filled out right before the focus group interviews. At the end of the interview which contained questions about the main reasons people take part in video games, the results came to include 6 dominant dimensions of video game motivations which were arousal, challenge, competition, diversion, fantasy, and social interaction. To briefly go over these motivations, arousal refers to the stimulation of emotions while playing video games as a result of fast action and high-quality graphics. Challenge refers to the fact that gamers enjoy playing video games since it pushes them to a higher level of skill or personal accomplishment. The article also states that the desire to solve puzzles in order to get to the next level or beat the game can be addictive. Competition, one of the main reasons for playing video games, is comprised of a clash to prove who is the more skilled player, especially with regards to online gameplay. This was mostly prevalent among male players who are gratified by the reactions of members of their peer group. Diversion refers to the idea that games are frequently used to avoid stress or responsibilities, whereby gamers use this leisure in order to fill time, relax, or escape. Moving on to the fantasy motivation, this trait explains that video games allow players to experience things that they normally would not be able to try out, such as driving race cars, or flying. Finally, there is social interaction, which is the main reason individuals got involved in playing video games at a young age, as stated per the article. To be more specific, participants in the focus groups mentioned that the arrival of the Nintendo incited

sleepovers since video games were played in large groups on the same console, and it also led to the formation of peer groups outside the gaming spectrum. Lucas et al. (2016) also conducted a second study to examine whether the traits discovered in the first study would be good predictors of amount of game use. Results showed that the traits are in fact good predictors of gameplay time with diversion, social interaction, and arousal being the most important predictors of time spent playing video games per hour. The authors do a great job at explicitly discussing the different motivations behind gaming while also clearly specifying the research methodologies they use; However, I find it odd that the number of focus groups conducted were not specified, and that the number of participants in the focus groups were a mere 4-8 participants. So, although the results of the research were extremely accurate I do not think they are capable of being the judge of the main motivations behind gaming on a larger scale.

The article titled “Videos Games Uses and Gratifications” by Robert Van Gohén & Elizabeth Williams (March 2010) tackles video games from a different perspective, seeking to divide the types of gamers into categories each with their own unique uses and gratifications behind playing. The gamer categories proposed by the article are:

- the *competitor* gains gratification by being better than other players
- the *explorer* plays to experience the boundaries of the play world, attempting to discover first what others do not know yet
- The *collector* plays to acquire most of the items and drops located throughout the game
- The *achiever* plays in order better themselves over time and hopefully play on a national level at some point
- The *joker* gains gratifications by enjoying the social aspects of the game such as voice-chatting and forging friendships although they are usually solo gamers

- The *director* plays for the thrill of being in control and in charge
- the *storyteller* plays to create or live in their own created world, and create a story out of that world
- The *craftsman* plays to build, solve puzzles, and engineer constructs.

Another important point that only this article touches on is the importance of vicarious experience, whereby one participates in a certain action or phenomena without actually being there. The article states that especially in fantasy and history games, players are able to experience important events such as World War II or soaring through the sky on a black dragon, vicariously (Gohen, 2010). To clarify, these video game participants are attracted to the ability to experience a universe they may only have ever imagined, and this is especially common amongst *storytellers*. Although the article significantly differentiates the various types of gamers, as well as touching on the role of vicarious experience in gaming, perhaps the provision of more adequate examples to further explain the types of gamers could give the readers a better idea and understanding of the perspectives and goals of each of the categories.

The following article tackles video game participants on a social psychology perspective. The article, titled “Uses and Gratifications of Chinese Online Gamers” conducted by Tao Sun, Bu Zhong, and Jun Zhang (31 August 2015) claims that roleplaying games were the most dominant gaming genre for both male and female online gamers, and that relief and relaxation were the most important gratifications obtained through playing video games. In order to study this, samples were conducted online in April 2003 among 2,379 Chinese online gamers. The study covered respondents from all over China who had video games as part of their hobbies. There were four main questions that investigated the uses and gratifications of online gamers. The first question asked about what online gamers like to play most, the second question asked about what online-

game-related activities users were most likely to participate in. The third question asked what fun online games could bring them, and the fourth question asked respondents to select as many as 3 of their favorite games among the 64 choices provided. Besides the finding that relaxation and relief were the most important gratifications for the Chinese participants, the results of the research show that consumers in collectivist cultures, as compared to those in individualist cultures, are less likely to be satisfied with their current lives (Zhang, 2006). This is why it is assumed that these people who are less satisfied and who feel less valued in their face-to-face communication might use the internet as an alternative to interpersonal communication. The article proceeds to explain that this is due to the nature of the medium which limits nonverbal cues, bypasses physical appearance, and allows the user to create a new identity free of the chains of social conformity. The lack of actual physical contact and the existence of norm-free online worlds allow the user to be freer while expressing themselves, thus making interaction less stressful. These phenomena may serve as the main explicators as to why roleplaying games have such popularity within the Chinese gaming community. To be more specific, the article states that Chinese gamers believe that the internet can be used to obtain identity fixes whereby one establishes or alters oneself identity, or even reinvents their virtual personalities in order to be their ideal self. Thus, instead of forging parasocial relationships within real life communities, online gamers develop parasocial relationships with each other, no matter the location, drawing online gaming much closer to the real-world environment. I believe that the authors neglect the fact that online games are not as glorious and utopian as they may seem to be. Most online games do in fact limit self-expression to a certain extent. This is especially present during the discussion of sensitive topics such racism, sexism, and hate speech. Some online games go as far as filtering the chat from specific words which serves to inhibit the amount of possible self-expression.

2.3 VRChat in Gaming

The main focus at hand is on the online virtual reality game called VRChat. VRChat is a free-to-play massive multiplayer online virtual reality social platform created by Graham Gaylor and Jesse Joudrey. It allows players to interact with others as 3D character models (Poetker, 2019). VR Chat's gameplay is similar to that set of games such as "Second Life" and "Habbo Hotel" whereby players can create their own distinct worlds in which they can interact with each other through virtual avatars. A software development kit released alongside the game gives players the ability to create or import character models from various franchises and adopt them as their personas. Player models are capable of supporting a wide range of motion such as audio lip-syncing and eye tracking and blinking. This online interaction between players from all around the world allows researchers to study the unique uses and gratifications that can be obtained from such encounters as well as the role of gender in these communication processes.

The article titled "Global Virtual Reality in Gaming Market (2020-2025) Growth, Trends, and Forecast" by Laura Wood, a senior press manager, describes the current state of virtual reality and its projected growth. Wood states that the virtual reality gaming market was valued at USD 7.7 Billion in 2019 and is projected to reach USD 42.5 billion by 2025 (Wood, 2020). As recent technological advancement in this field have revealed new enterprises, VR technology has gained widespread recognition and adoption over the past few years. The article describes VR gaming as a 3D environment that enables the user on a computing device with the help of a mouse, touch screen, and other components, to feel the physical presence in the game's setting. There are various accessories associated with virtual reality technology such as virtual reality headsets, wrap-around display screens, virtual reality rooms equipped with wearable computers, and sensory components which enable gamers to interact, view, and move around objects in the game's setting. Wood

claims that according to a worldwide survey of technology company executives, startup founders, investors, and consultants, 59% of respondents believe gaming will dominate the investment directed to the development of VR technology. Additionally, Wood claims that VR gaming provides the aspects of interaction and communication to gamers in the game environment, which is in turn attracting more audiences, and thus skyrocketing the growth of the market. The article goes on to explain the importance of mobile devices in providing quality entertainment while being significantly affordable. To illustrate, Wood claims that mobile virtual reality gaming is the most affordable experience for consumers who want to explore VR gaming without spending a substantial amount of money. Additionally, with the growing number of mobile gamers, the mobile VR gaming market is expected to gain significant traction as the demand of virtual reality accessories are inevitably increasing. The current most widely known VR headsets for mobile phones are Samsung Gear and Google Daydream, and it is estimated that the number of VR headsets will reach up to 82 million units. Wood concludes her article by stating that while virtual reality for mobile gaming currently provides a less immersive experience than console and PC-based VR, its adoption is expected to increase along mobile technology enhancement.

Building on what Wood mentioned in the previous article, Jyoti Gupta builds on the development of virtual reality technology along the business spectrum in his article titled “How Virtual Reality is Transforming the Gaming Industry”. As time passes and as more developers are taking interest in the realm of VR, new upcoming businesses are coming up with new solutions that attract many new users. VR is even helping the vendors in overcoming strenuous challenges in the industry through the introduction of VR products (Gupta, 2019). Gupta states that virtual reality gadgets are trending highly amongst gamers. This is to say that the awareness of VR is steadily growing among users and players. To illustrate, after the release of the VR headset on the

market, a massive change and revolution started in the gaming industry. This resulted in higher demands of VR games because of the otherworldly experience that only VR can provide so delicately. The article begins to state the benefits of virtual reality in the game industry. VR has proven itself to be a game changer in the gaming sector by providing an improved user experience. Gupta brings forth several benefits that VR-driven applications provide, such as appealing to gamers with virtual objects, and offering the ability to take players into the game in real time. Other stated benefits include the cutting-edge capabilities that enrich the gaming environment, the digitally extended reality that enable players to join in at anywhere and anytime, the seemingly realistic social interactions amongst players, and the immense amount of player freedom and control. Gupta concludes his article by stating that the market size of the virtual reality gaming industry is thriving with a fast growth rate. The author further states that it is also the ideas implemented in virtual reality games that make the platform all so fascinating. Being a withholder of endless possibility, as well as being an economic virtue with its financial prowess, Gupta comfortably depicts the role of virtual reality's capabilities in the flourishing of the global gaming sector.

The article titled "Psychological Benefits of Virtual Reality for Patients in Rehabilitation Therapy" by Chih-Hung Chen, Ming-Chang Jeng, Chin-Ping Fung, Ji-Liang Doong, and Tien-Yow Chuang (2009) claims that virtual-reality based rehabilitation programs can ease patients' tension and induce calm. The article begins by explaining rehabilitation, which is an opportunity to help people reduce the impact of motor limitations through physical therapy. Physical therapy is a long term and tedious treatment, so stimulating patients' motivation is always a major concern. Fortunately, in recent years, improvements in computer technology have made virtual reality popular and available in various therapies such as pain reduction, stress reduction, skill training,

telerehabilitation and rehabilitation (Chen, 2009). Virtual rehabilitation is an applied action that integrates VR with rehabilitation thus allowing the provision of therapeutic intervention locally or at a distance through the use of VR hardware and simulations. The high flexibility and programmability of VR enable a therapist to set a variety of controlled stimuli, monitors patients' responses during virtual rehabilitation, and offer clinical assessment and rehabilitation options that are lacking in traditional methods. Patients are situated in a lifelike but virtual environment, allowing all activities to be carried out safely. The research methodology used for this article was an experiment. In order to concretely investigate the psychological benefits of virtual reality in rehabilitation, an experimental group underwent therapy with a virtual reality-based exercise bike, and a control group underwent the therapy without virtual-reality equipment. The setting took place in a hospital laboratory and was conducted on a sample of 30 patients suffering from spinal-cord injury. After conducting the experiment and retrieving the results, it was clear that virtual reality played a great role in easing patients' tension and inducing calmness and thus benefits a patient's overall psychological well-being as a whole. To criticize, I would argue that a patient's ability in order to be fully immersed in a virtual-reality-exercise may be limited depending on the graphical quality of the virtual reality scene. To illustrate, let's presume a patient was not motivated to ride a virtual bike because the bike looks unrealistic or even too pixelated, they would not likely want to commit to the exercise thus affecting their rehabilitation process. This argument could also bring to question the amount of economic sacrifice needed to bring high quality virtual reality gear to every hospital considering virtual rehabilitation was a clearly successful process in this case.

2.4 Gender in Gaming

The article titled "College Students' Video Game Participation and Perceptions: Gender Differences and implications" by Shirley Matile Ogletree (2007), sought to examine the difference

in participation levels between male and female video game players, as well as the potential effects of these videogames upon the two sexes . Ogletree was specifically interested in exploring gender differences in video game playing among college students, the player perceptions of the male and female character roles in the video games that they played, the relation between masculinity and gaming, and the potential interference of gaming without aspects of students' lives. Ogletree hypothesized that more men than women would frequently play video games, and that gamers would report more male than female characters with the female characters having a more sexualized portrayal in the video games that the participants played. Regarding the research methodology, the population used was a total of 206 college students consisting of 79 men and 127 women who participated in a survey questionnaire. The majority of participants were between 18 and 25 years of age. The article indicates that two versions of the questionnaire were administered on April 27th, 2004, as an extra credit option in a sophomore level human sexuality course. One questionnaire was given to students who indicated that they played video games at least an hour a week, and a different questionnaire was given to those who played videogames less than an hour a week. The first 73 items on both questionnaires were the same. They included four demographics items, 60 slightly modified items assessed through a 5-point Likert type scale from the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI), and nine items that assessed involvement with video games as well as potential problems related to video game playing. The BSRI consisted of 60 adjectives, such as "self-reliant" and "affectionate", and participants would indicate the degree to which each adjective describes them. Twenty of the adjectives were "masculine", 20 are feminine, and 20 are neutral filler items. Regarding the articles that assessed video game playing, the article states that participants estimated, through the use of 5 categories that ranged from "0-1" to "more than 15":

- The average number of hours per week that they played video games.

- The average number of hours per week that they watched a significant other play video games.

On a 5-point scale that ranged from “not at all” to “very frequently,” students also rated the degree of video game interference with relationships, with sleeping, and with preparation for college classes. As per Ogletree, research results indicated that twenty-one percent of the women and 68% of the men played two or more hours per week. No significant difference was found in the proportion of men or women who watched, without participating, a significant other play two more hours per week. However, men were more likely than women to watch, without participating, friends or family members play video games for two or more hours a week. Men were significantly more likely than women to indicate that video game playing interfered with their sleeping, and preparation of college classes. Although a significant difference was not found regarding the amount of conflict in a relationship with a significant other, the nature of the conflict varied by participant gender. This is to say that a greater proportion of women than men complained about their significant other playing for too long, whereas a greater proportion of men than women indicated that their significant other complained about their own video game playing. Ogletree discusses her results by stating that her set hypotheses were validated. Gender differences were indeed found in college students’ amount of video game playing, such that men are more likely than women to indicate that they played two or more hours a week. Differences in the perceived portrayal of men and women in video games were also found, as predicted in Ogletree’s hypothesis. Almost 80% of participants who regularly played video games estimated that 70% or more of the main characters in the games were male, whereas female video game characters were rated as more sexually provocative, less strong and aggressive, and more likely to be in need for rescue than were male characters. Ogletree concludes her dissertation by stating that video games,

as with other media forms, possess the potential for positive as well negative effects on children, adolescents, and adults. Relationships may be impacted, academic preparation may be affected, and the gender related content of video games may influence expectations for men and women in our society. Ogletree further states that as the industry matures and the public becomes more aware, implications of video game playing for relationship conflict, education, and gendered societal expectations need to be explicated and discussed more clearly.

The article titled “Shirts vs. Skins: Clothing as an indicator of Gender Role Stereotyping in Video Games” by Berrin Beasley and Tracy Collins Standley examined the portrayal of women in 47 randomly selected games from the Nintendo 64 and Sony PlayStation console gaming systems. Both Beasley and Standley believe that videogames, similar to other media forms, are sources of information that children and young adults may use to determine what behaviors and attitudes are considered appropriately masculine and feminine, and thus brought forth a methodology to produce intricate results (Beasley & Collins, 2009). To determine gender role stereotyping based on the presence or absence of female characters and the types of clothing those characters were wearing in video games, Beasley and Standley conducted a content analysis. Throughout this methodology, a population of video games was constructed by compiling a list of the *Nintendo 64* and *PlayStation* games available for purchase at the time of the study, whilst keeping adult-only titles on the side. Once picked and sorted, the population of video games consisted of 227 *PlayStation* games, and 114 *Nintendo 64* games. The unit of analysis the authors used in their content analysis was character. *Character* was defined as a human, animal, or object within a video game that displayed human-like qualities such as speaking, using tools, or making conscious decisions. Each game was started at the beginning, and each character within the first 20 minutes of gameplay was coded. Characters were coded for the type of game system they

appeared in, whether *PlayStation* or *Nintendo 64*, as well as the type of game for which they appeared, such as combat, team sports, individual sports, classic video game, or storyline. In addition, characters were also coded for gender and species, which were categorized as female, male, and unknown for those characters whose gender could not be determined. Clothing for characters was also coded by Beasley and Standley, where clothing was split into three parts, being the sleeve-length, the neckline, and the lower body clothing. Cleavage of the characters was also coded for analytical purposes. After intercoder reliability was achieved with more than 80% agreement on all categories, the results were analyzed and interpreted. It was concluded by both authors that female characters are vastly underrepresented in videogames available for the two major console gaming systems at the time of the analysis. In fact, there were more characters of an indeterminate gender, being 88, than there were female characters, at 82. The characters of the indeterminate gender consisted of mostly animals or aliens without speaking parts, whereas most of the female characters appeared in individual and sport and storyline games. There were also more female characters in *PlayStation* games than in *Nintendo 64* games. The article states that not only are women underrepresented in videogames, but those who are present are less clothed than their male counterparts. Female characters were more likely to be seen in low-cut clothing and with bare arms than male characters, and nearly one half, almost 41% of all female characters, had enlarged representations of their breasts. To add to the circumstance, the authors concluded that nearly one third of the misrepresented female characters appeared in games rated E, which are games proclaimed suitable for young children. Beasley and Standley observed intricately that the majority of female characters are dressed in such a way as to bring attention to their bodies, particularly their breasts, which carry strong sexual meaning for the young boys who predominantly play these games. Beasley and Standley tied this finding directly to gender schema

theory, which explains that children exposed to gender role stereotyping in media, including video games, may develop those attitudes themselves. The article concludes by stating that video games may be a fairly new media industry, but game designers should be reminded that obvious gender role discrimination in any media industry should promptly be reassessed.

Building on Beasley's and Standley's findings, the article titled "The Effects of the Sexualization of Female Video Game Characters on Gender Stereotyping and Female Self-Concept" by Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz seeks to investigate the short-term effects of exposure to sexualized female video game characters on gender stereotyping and female self-concept in emerging adults. The article states that social cognitive theory of gender development and differentiation offers a framework for understanding how exposure to mediated models, such as video game characters, may impart gender lessons to consumers via influencing their attitudes and beliefs about gender, as well as their own self-concept. With this knowledge, Morawitz decided to conduct an experiment with intent on answering two main research questions, and to do so she had to define the concept of *telepresence* and set her hypotheses. To clarify, Morawitz refers to telepresence, or presence, as the feeling of being 'present' in a mediated environment (Behm-Morawitz, 2009). The article further states that when one experiences presence, they overlook the superficiality of the media environment and become immersed in it. Thus, Morawitz coined 'presence' as the degree to which a video game player feels present in the game. This is to say that a character experiencing a high level of presence would feel more immersed in the game and involved with the game characters than they would in their real physical lives. Below are four examples of hypothesis used in the article, keeping in mind that the word *condition* refers to the video game content:

H2a: Video game condition will predict player beliefs about gender career and domestic roles, such that playing a sexualized female character will result in greater belief in traditional gender roles, in comparison with playing a non-sexualized female character or no video game.

H2b: Video game condition will predict player beliefs about gender appearance, such that playing a sexualized female character will result in greater support for traditional gender appearances, in comparison with playing a non-sexualized female character or no videogame.

H2c: Video game condition will predict player beliefs about gender cognitive capabilities, such that playing a sexualized female character will result in greater support for traditional gender cognitive capabilities, in comparison with playing a non-sexualized female character or no video game.

H2d: Video game condition will predict player beliefs about gender physical capabilities, such that playing a sexualized female character will result in greater support for traditional gender physical capabilities, in comparison with playing a non-sexualized female character or no video game.

The two research questions that Morawitz sought to answer were:

RQ1: Will the gender of the participant interact with *condition* to determine gender stereotyping?

RQ2: Will *presence* interact with *condition* in predicting female self-esteem, female self-efficacy, and gender stereotyping?

In order to investigate these relationships, Morawitz conducted both a pilot study and an experimental study. The pilot study was conducted to determine the video game stimuli, particularly making sure that the two video games used in the experiment effectively manipulated the sexualization of the female character; and that the games were comparable to one another besides their physical portrayal of the female heroine. The results from the pilot study indicated that both: video games, or gaming *conditions*, were seen as equivalent on all aspects of gameplay

and characteristics. Moving on to the main experiment conducted by Morawitz, a total of 328 undergraduate students from a large university in the United States took part in this experimental study on a voluntary and anonymous basis. 63% of the participants were women (n=206), and 37% of participants were men, (n=122). No videogame experience was required for participation in the experiment; however, the majority of students had some experience playing video games. Regarding the procedure, participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: the sexualized video game condition, the non-sexualized video game condition, or the control, with no video game condition. The players were introduced to the game settings and were left to play on their own for 30 minutes. Upon the completion of the game playing period, participants filled out an online questionnaire asking questions about their videogaming habits, recognition of the game, previous exposure to the character, presence experienced during gameplay, gender role beliefs, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. The results of the experiment concluded that hypothesis 1a, which predicted that playing the sexualized female character would result in lower self-esteem for females, was not supported. Hypothesis 1b stated that playing the sexualized female character would result in lower self-efficacy in women. This hypothesis was supported as Morawitz stated that playing a sexualized female video game character negatively affected feelings of self-efficacy in women, compared to playing no video game character. Hypothesis 2 (a-d) was supported, as it proposed that the video game condition would predict attitudes and beliefs about gender among both male and female participants, and some support was found for this relationship. In fact, video game *condition* was found to have a significant main effect on subsequent beliefs about gender-related capabilities. Morawitz further specified that participants who played the sexualized character reported less favorable attitudes towards women's cognitive capabilities than did participants who did not play a video game. Morawitz

concludes her article by stating that findings from this study are informative not only to media effects researchers, but also parents involved in their children's video game play, as well as legislators involved in policymaking related to video game content and ratings.

On the other hand, the article titled "Video Game Engagement: Gender differences, Preferred Mode of Play and Problem Solving" by Dr. T Fazer and Dr. R. Reid (March 2018) claim that there are no significant differences between gender, and mode of play in engagement levels. Also, the article claims that no statistical differences were found between single or multiplayer games with regards to problem solving in addition to single player games being the dominant preference. To elaborate on the article's position on gaming and gender, it states that there exists a common ideal whereby gaming is associated with mostly males. This view is shared by 57% of women who play video games themselves according to a survey conducted by Maeve Dugan (Dugan, 2015). However, based on actual statistics, a nearly identical share of men and women report ever playing video games, almost an equal 50% statistical result. Going further into the explanation, although the article states that the gaming industry, according to "The Independent Game Developers' Association" (TIGA), offers a variety of games with female protagonists and role-play games offering the choice between female and male characters; the majority of games particularly in the action genre continue to portray sexualized female characters. In addition, this phenomenon according to surveys has shown that these negative stereotypes have affected female performance over males. Furthermore, previous studies have shown that the amount of time spent playing video games was significantly higher in males than females, as per the article. The authors state that this is due to a variance in motivation. To be more specific, social interaction was interpreted to be the dominant force of motivation for females, whereas personal gain and achievement was the main drive for male gameplay. Moreover, the article explains that game genre

choice is sensitive to gender difference. An experiment was conducted where 276 US undergraduate students from a large Midwestern university were divided between male and female and tasked to design a game. Females opted to design a gender-neutral game almost free of violence and with real world settings, while the male counterpart opted to design a male-audience targeted game. Finally, it is explained that gaming habits also differ between males and females. To illustrate, experiment results portrayed that female players tend to play video games as a break from boredom whereas male players are inclined to take it more seriously as a form of entertainment and even consider it a priority.

The article titled “Sex, Lies, and Video Games: The Portrayal of Male and Female Characters on Video Game Covers” written by Melinda C.R Burgess, Steven Paul Stermer, and Stephen R. Burgess, sought to examine the portrayal of males and females on videogame covers in terms of their physical appearances, and in-game objectives. The authors of the article remarked that close no previous research has been done to examine whether male and female bodies are portrayed in a realistic way in video games in spite of the amount of time that teens are known to spend playing them (Burgess, 2007)

To test their hypotheses, the article states that the content of 225 covers of video games from the three most popular video game consoles, being *Xbox*, *PlayStation*, and *GameCube*, at the time of collection. The covers were primarily downloaded from a popular online store and divided into different genres. For each genre, the authors compiled a list of games, and each list was cross-referenced to avoid any overlap, as many video games could be categorized into multiple genres. Additionally, the authors examined sales rankings at the online popular store of *Amazon* to ensure that the 50 top selling video games for each console were represented in the sample. Data was collected through the content analysis approach, where three raters coded the covers. One rater

was used to resolving disagreements while the other two served as the primary raters. Covers were presented in their original size in a computer slide show. The coders each viewed a cover at the same time and completed a checklist with the relevant categories while the cover was in view. Then the coders orally stated their decisions. A few operational definitions were conducted by the authors for the content analysis methodology. For example, the operational definition for *Type of Character* was defined as the largest character on the cover, the central character, the character forming performing a central action, the characters closest to the foreground, or the only character on the cover. The article then displayed the results of the experiment, where of the 225 covers examined, 173 contained human characters. While all characters were coded, human or not, the results discussed here are only for the human characters. Males were twice as likely to be featured on covers as females were. This unbalanced representation became even more pronounced when examining characters with approximately three and a half times more men than women, as 485 human characters were coded as 78.6% men, and 21.4% women. Regarding hypothesis 2, males were almost five times more likely to be portrayed as the primary character (N=140) than the females (N=30). Males were also more almost four times more likely to be portrayed as ancillary characters (N=241) than females (N=74). The authors infer that it is likely that both of these findings were artifacts of the discrepancy between number of male and female characters overall. Regarding hypothesis 3, thirty-three-point eight percent (N=25) of the covers represented women in objectified roles with 32.7% of the female characters (N=34) portrayed as such. Female characters were also far more likely to be role objectified than males. Not a single primary male character was role objectified, yet 20% of the primary female characters were. As for hypothesis 4, male and female characters were equally likely to be represented as partial bodies as opposed to whole bodies. Moving on to define hypothesis 5, physical objectification referred generally to the

portrayal of males and females in a sexualized way. Overall, physical objectification of females occurred on 47.4% (N=35) of the covers and 42.3% (N=44) of the characters were portrayed in physically objectified ways. For males, physical objectification occurred in 13.5% (N=21) of the covers and 5.8% (N=22) of the characters were portrayed in physically objectified ways. With regards to hypothesis 6, and similar to the findings obtained by authors Morawitz and Ogletree, female characters were significantly more likely to be portrayed as busty/super-busty as opposed to their male counterparts who were portrayed as muscular/super-muscular. The article further mentions that the issue of physical exaggeration becomes most damaging when it is only limited to the portrayals of extreme physiques, the super-busty and the super-muscular. Similarly, hypothesis 7 was verified as thirty percent (N=12) of the female characters were physically objectified, as opposed to the one only male character who was presented in a physically objectified way. As for hypothesis 8, covers were almost four times as likely to portray males as violent at 65%, which is higher than females who were portrayed in such a manner only 38% of the time. The authors conclude their dissertation by stating that female characters in their study were rarely given roles of action compared to their male counterparts. This finding emerged based on the fact that there were almost five times more primary male characters than female characters. Second, these male characters tended not to share their spotlight with primary female characters, and third, female characters, when they were present, were often role objectified.

2.5 Gaming in Lebanon

The article titled “Isn’t Life just a Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game” is written by female author Tanite Chahwan (Chahwan, 2018), an MA graduate in English literature from the American University of Beirut. Her article describes the general gaming scene in Lebanon and how it has developed considerably over the past decades. In the late 90s, home computers and

internet connections in Lebanon were slow and costly. Networks or computer lounges became popular due to their ability to provide easy access to computers at an affordable price. In most networks, internet usage was priced at 1000 LL (0.57 euro) an hour, and gaming was 500 LL, (0.26 euro) an hour. The entire setup in networks was there, games and computer software included. Some networks even had a dedicated staff who offered customers guidance and solved their technical problems. Soon enough, networks were not only available in cities, but became widespread, reaching villages, small towns, and even beach resorts. “Networks” as they remain to be locally called, had a significant impact on children in the 1990s. Online multiplayer games were quite rare in the world, and definitely an impossibility in Lebanon at the time. Therefore, networks gave Lebanese players the opportunity to play with each other from separate computers in the gaming lounge through a LAN cable, which simulated the online gaming experience in which at the time would seem incomprehensible in terms of Lebanon’s technological capabilities. Chahwan continues to explain that even though computer lounges might have faded away in some countries due to their rapid technological advancements, networks remain prevalent in Lebanese gaming culture. While the costs of both gaming equipment and internet connection play a role in keeping networks alive, Lebanese gamers mostly appreciate the social aspect of attending. According to Chahwan, network goers prefer to play and be surrounded by other gamers, even reaching a point where they refer to each other by their in-game usernames. The article mentions Karim Karam, a 25-year-old civil engineer known as *K* in his local network who that “whether it is watching other players, interacting with them, or meeting up with your friends to play together, it’s just more fun.” The article points out that gaming, contrary to popular belief, is not an entirely solitary hobby, for even those fortunate enough to have affordable setups at home, would rather play at a network, spending around 2 to 8 hours per visit. The article also mentions Charbel Nehme, a 32-year-old

who works in marketing and advertising, who says that visiting the network “is a routine, a sanctum from daily life. Gaming is like meditation to me, I also come here to see the guys, we do more than play games, we talk, we vent, we have fun.” Chahwan goes on to explain that with the invention of smartphones and tablets, and the constant availability of the internet, network customers became composed of exclusive gamers, and the audience for networks became significantly reduced as years passed, and technology as well as internet in Lebanon became more prominent. Chahwan then moves on to discuss the state of gaming in modern Lebanon, mentioning that among the adult population, gaming is still widely conceived as a time-wasting hobby; However, Chahwan says that there is yet hope for a perspective change on the topic of videogaming in Lebanon, seeing as to how locally raised teams are taking part in international gaming tournaments, winning prize pools up to \$3 million.

Will Freeman (Freeman, 2019), who has written articles for the likes of *The Guardian*, and *The Observer*, builds on Chahwan’s mention of the local technological advancements, discussing Lebanon’s potential as a growing presence in the global mobile game development community. The author states that according to the leading Arabic-language newspaper, *An-Nahar*, Lebanon was home to only two game companies in 2016. A year later, that number climbed to six, and as time passed, there have been efforts to build and internationalize. Freeman explains that Lebanon for decades has been committed to fostering a proliferating tech sector, and it seems that investors are keen to support. The Lebanese population is modest in size with a population of just over six million, and yet its status and presence bolsters in the wider economy and culture of the MENA region, Freeman says. However, despite this commitment, Freeman states that Lebanon is seeing its most significant protests in years, as the public expresses anger over a proposed austerity budget and a deepening financial crisis. Freeman interprets that despite the current

economic turmoil, the future of the Lebanese gaming industry seems a sliver brighter. As of 2019, according to the state-run investment development authority of Lebanon, the country ranked 4th in the world for its science and maths education and 18th in the world with regard to its overall education system. This has led to the emergence of an impressive research and development infrastructure, which is reflected by the Lebanese population, for while the meaningful and important struggle of the broad population in Lebanon is present, the gaming industry continues to thrive. Freeman states that a new generation of ambitious Lebanese mobile game developers are finding their footing, and openly eyeballing significant successes in the US and beyond. Studios like *Yayy*, *Wixel*, and *Game Cooks*, have built impressive multifaceted game companies that focus on mobile, adver-gaming and virtual reality gaming. Freeman concludes his article by stating that even though Lebanon is not yet to assert itself as a leader of videogame development in the MENA region, it definitely has the potential to do so, rather than just an opportunity.

Nabil Makari (2021) agrees with Freeman in terms of the developing economic crisis in Lebanon and its effects on the gaming industry, however unlike Freeman, Makari sees the future of the industry to be much grimmer in his article titled “Gaming in Lebanon is Seriously Hit”. Makari explains the harsh economic state of the videogame industry in Lebanon and how this state ultimately affects Lebanese videogame enthusiasts. With regards to the business model, the current Lebanese gaming industry is divided into two primary segments being the developers who create the gaming application, and the publishers who promote the applications on various outlets. The current economic crisis in Lebanon indefinitely affects the developmental side of the videogame industry chaotically, as members of the industry continue to struggle with financial difficulties. Makari illustrates by bringing to light the capital control sanctions that restrict payment capacities abroad, the exile of talent as prospects leave Lebanon, and the sorry state of the electrical and

internet infrastructures. Emphasizing on this, Makari mentions a local Lebanese videogame company, *Game Cooks*, who managed to establish an office in San Francisco in a mere two days, whereas it took them over a month to do so in Lebanon, portraying the poor state of the Lebanese regulatory framework. Ziad Talge, founder and CEO of *Yayy*, yet another popular Lebanese videogame developing company, is clear on the difficulties that app developers face due to high electricity costs and unreliable internet connection. In addition, Makari explains that capital control laws have made it difficult for capital firms to invest in local videogame developers due to the economic insecurity of Lebanon. Financial resources that were meant to primarily fund Lebanese videogame companies are instead used for international payments that cover software services and talent abroad, instead of those that exist locally. Furthermore, the state of the internet in Lebanon is amongst the slowest in the Middle East. According to *Speedtest*, a formidable internet testing application, Lebanon ranks 159th out of 177 countries for internet broadband speeds. The lacking economic state does not only disable the provision of a functioning internet connection throughout Lebanon, but completely discombobulates the proficiency of local videogame development firms. This is due to the fact that file transfers and data allocations are directly proportional to internet download and upload speeds, thus resulting in a significant time extension between the originally specified organizational objective dates. Makari concludes his article by explaining the unfortunate state in which Lebanese talents are being handicapped by the lasting economic crisis. The impossibility to pay for servers, publishers, or talent, while obtaining little to no funding, might even signify the demise of the Lebanese gaming industry.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Uses and Gratifications

The uses and gratifications theory developed by Elihu Katz and Jay Blumler seeks to explain why and how people actively seek out specific media to satisfy their various needs. The main questions posed by these researchers is: why do people use certain mediums/media platforms and what gratifications do they get from it? Individuals use media for a variety of reasons and these motives vary depending on one's situation. The uses and gratifications theory arose originally in the 1940s and underwent a revival in the 1970s and 1980s. The theory is also based on a functionalist paradigm which explains how people use the media to gratify themselves in terms of their psychological and social needs. To elaborate on the history of the uses and gratifications theory, in 1944, Herta Hertzog interviewed people who listened to soap operas and determined that they sought three different types of gratification from this form of entertainment (David, 2016). These three types of gratifications were emotional, wishful thinking, and learning. In 1969, Jay Blumler and Denis McQuail studied the United Kingdom's 1964 election and categorized people's motives for watching certain political programs on television. Upon analyzing the acquired information, the theory was later further developed by Jay Blumler, Joseph Brown, and Denis McQuail, who proposed four uses of media: diversion, personal relationships, personal identity, and surveillance. Nowadays, researchers are exploring possibilities in which specific media outlets can be related to specific gratifications, such as television. There are a few main sources of gratifications to consider when dealing with television such as the medium's content, the viewer's familiarity with the genre, the general exposure to the medium, and the social context in which the medium is used. To illustrate, a medium's content could refer to a channel on TV running a national geographic documentary, whereas the familiarity of the genre could refer to the

thriller section on Netflix. It is important to note that individual needs seek different uses and responses. To be more specific, the idea of boredom versus excitement, this is to say that a bored person will seek exciting content, whereas an excited person will seek relaxing content. Additionally, the same TV program may gratify different needs for different individuals depending on their personalities and backgrounds. The most common reasons for media use as noted by Denis McQuail (1987) were information, personal identity, integration and social interaction, and entertainment:

- Information refers to educating one's self on the events occurring around them and around the world. This gratification seeks to satisfy curiosity and general interest while obtaining knowledge.
- Personal identity refers to one's drive to find reinforcement for personal values as well as gaining insight to one's self through the use of media.
- Integration and social interaction refers to an individual's capability to identify with others and gain a sense of belonging. This process will render individuals extremely capable to find a basis for conversation and social interaction in general.
- The entertainment gratification in media is one's need to be diverted from their issues and escaping their reality in one way or another. It is a kind of emotional release.

Delving further into the main concepts of the uses and gratifications theory. UGC, or user-generated content, is any form of content such as videos, images, and audio files, created and posted by users on online platforms such as social media and wikis. Vicarious experience is another concept of the uses and gratifications theory whereby one attaches their lives to the experience of another person, such as watching jungle survival tactics in a National Geographic documentary. In addition, social utility is defined as the uses and benefits of a product or service that satisfies

interpersonal needs, such as conformity, formation of personality, and individuality. Catharsis is another concept of the uses and gratifications theory, whereby one goes through the process of releasing and relieving themselves from strong or repressed emotions. Additionally, escapism is another concept of the uses and gratifications theory whereby one has the tendency to seek distractions and relief from unpleasant realities, especially by seeking entertainment or engaging in fantasy. A final concept of the uses and gratifications theory, diversion, is the activity of diverting one's mind from tedious or serious concerns.

3.2 Gender Theory

Gender theory was developed during the 1970s and 1980s as a set of ideas which particularly thrived in the United States and Great Britain, with far fewer followers in the European region. Essentially, this theory proposed observing masculinity and femininity as sets of mutually created characteristics shaping the lives of men and women. It attempted to replace and challenge ideas of masculinity and femininity which were operating in the realm of fixed biological determinants, the sex of male or female.

The term sex refers to the categories of the biologically observable human body, being female, male, or intersex. On the other hand, the term gender refers to the categories of social expectations, roles, and behaviors pertaining to masculinity and femininity. The history of gender theory, although complex, can be discussed through the events of three waves. First-wave feminism refers to the early feminists, including the suffrage movement that fought to secure the right for women to vote. Then in the 1960s came second-wave feminism, including the women's Liberation Movement that campaigned for equal rights on issues such as employment, marital relationships, and sexual orientation. Second wave feminism is often regarded as less about raw power and more about the power of representation. However, second-wave feminism has been

challenged since the 1990s by post-feminism and the third wave, in which both reject the rigid gender politics of the second wave, and instead see gender identities as less fixed and personally empowering. Gender theory brings with it an abundance of concepts, one of which being the male gaze. The male gaze is the act of depicting women and the world, in the visual arts and in literature, from a masculine, heterosexual perspective that presents and represents women as sexual objects for the pleasure of the male viewer. The male gaze was first coined by Laura Mulvey, who stated in her article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (Mulvey, 1975) that “The magic of Hollywood style at its best, arose from its skilled and satisfying manipulation of visual pleasure.” She further states in her article that “women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness” (Mulvey, 1975). The following quotes explain that the male gaze invokes the sexual politics of gaze and suggests a sexualized way of looking that empowers men and objectifies women. The male gaze, as stated by Mulvey, borrows from the psychoanalysis coined by Freud, who argued that the body and the mind become inextricably linked in the early years of human life and are not separate entities. In Freudian theory, the notion of scopophilia means the “pleasure in looking” which is explained as a human instinct that develops during a person’s youth where they begin to experience control over their sight and can fix it on various objects, such as toys. In the fields of psychology and psychiatry, the term scopophilia describes a person’s deriving of sexual pleasure from looking at something or someone. Mulvey also borrows from Jacques Lacan’s voyeurism, which is coined as a practice in which an individual derives sexual pleasure from observing other people (Zizek, 2011). One more important concept within gender theory is ego ideals. According to Mulvey, during Hollywood narrative films, spectators are often encouraged to identify themselves with on-screen characters, whether they are icons, villains, or even side

characters. These spectators tend to imagine these characters as superior reflections of themselves, this phenomenon came to be known as an ego-ideal, through which spectators proceed to live out their fantasies as the superior reflection of themselves. Gender is also a relevant issue in the concept of video games, and thus the concepts of masculinity and femininity must be further defined. The term masculinity stresses gender, unlike the word male, which focuses on biological sex. Thus, as stated by Bridges (2020), the pursuit of studying masculinity should not be confined to biological males. This is due to the fact that masculinity has emerged in the last few decades of the 20th century as a topic of interdisciplinary study. It deals with the diversity of identities, behaviors, and meaning that constitute the label *masculine*, that are not assumed as universal. Since masculinity composes quite a spectrum, it cannot be referred to as though it were a timeless essence common amongst all men. This is to say that instead of having a single form of masculinity, there is instead many masculinities, since masculinity throughout history has meant different things to different people in different cultures and in different historical periods. Studies have shown that men and masculinities have taken their lead from feminist studies (Bridges, 2020) of women and gender which seek to both identify the social construction of gender, as well as illuminate the ways that men play a role in gender and sexual inequality. Michael Kimmel had another perspective on masculinity. He theorized how masculinity is grounded in homophobia and a violent opposition to femininity. Kimmel defined masculinity not as individual personality stereotypes, but as a set of ideological tools or constructs available to boys and men that define gay men, girls, and women as the inferior feminine other. This is to say, that masculinity is first and foremost defined as *not* femininity. Thus, as per Kimmel, masculinity may even compel boys and men to see girls, women, and gay men as inferior and act toward them accordingly. According to Kimmel, men's violence is not an expression of their personalities, but instead a series of practices and ideas available to

men so that they may feel and act as the dominant class in relationship to girls, women, and gay men (Kimmel, 2010). This idea was a subtle but important shift by Kimmel. If masculinity was conceptualized as being integrated into personality; that would be to say that masculinity is something that men carry around with little choice as if it were an integrated part of them. In contrast, Kimmel's definition of masculinity emphasized the social rather than the psychological aspects of masculinity. He further stated that masculine behavior is optional, not a biological or psychological inevitability. Due to the multitude of tussling between various theorists and their definitions of masculinity, a specific term came to embody the traits of masculinity which situate boys and men as dominant and superior in contrast to the inferior and subordinate female. This term came to be known as toxic masculinity, which is a concept of gender theory to be further analyzed and interpreted in this dissertation. Toxic masculinity refers to traditional cultural masculine norms that can be harmful to men, women, and society overall. It is important to note that this concept of toxic masculinity does not condemn men or male attributes, but rather emphasizes the harmful effects of conformity to certain exaggerated masculine traits which are unhealthy even to men. Such traits include lack of emotion, self-sufficiency, dominance, and sexual virility. To illustrate, someone who exhibits toxic masculinity will usually show signs of aggression, sexual aggression and control, suppressed emotions, hyper-competitiveness, low empathy, and entitlement (Legg, 2020). The term toxic masculinity stems of from the men's movement in the 1980s. This movement, founded by men for men, aimed to provide men with an outlet for their manliness. Legg states that certain groups of men felt they were no longer able to express these traditionally male or masculine behaviors in modern society that saw these traits as damaging. Members of the movement believed that if they were unable to act on these male characteristics, they would ultimately manifest as chauvinism or aggression towards women. Legg

and Bridges both agree that the original concept of toxic masculinity, as defined by the 1980s men's movement, was incorrect. Both authors deemed it so since it still suggested that masculinity has one pure form, whereas Legg and Bridges theorize that there are instead many forms. Masculinity and femininity, in their various forms, play a role in the constitution of one's gender identity. Thus another concept to be analyzed in this thesis is the concept of gender identity and its transcendence into the virtual gaming plane. Authors Katherine Bessiere, Fleming Seay, and Sarah Kiesler (2007), theorize that games offer players the opportunity for personal expression and competence building through the construction of their character, and the character's achievements over time. This created character has come to be known as a player avatar, which the authors state are used to express aspects of the players' ideal selves. Nicholas Maisonave, a published writer at Stanford University, theorizes that the use of avatars in the virtual realm allows for an unprecedented level of self-expression and exploration of one's identity (Maisonave, 2011). According to Laura Mulvey's description of what is an ego ideal, as well as Maisonave's perspective on self-expression, and Kiesler's description of the ideal self, it can be deduced that gender identity is in fact revealed and expressed through not only the creation of one's representative avatar, but also their in-game interactions.

Regarding the uses and gratifications theory, the concepts of catharsis, social utility, vicarious experience, escapism, and diversion will be used to assess the main reasons why a person chooses to play VRChat. On another hand, concepts from gender theory such as the male gaze and ego-ideals will be utilized in order to discover whether the male gaze can transcend into virtual boundaries, and the possibility of players achieving their ideal selves. The concept of toxic masculinity will be used and studied to infer whether according characteristics are displayed in the game of the VRChat.

Due to previously discussed concepts, the following research questions and hypotheses will be guiding the research.

- 1) Why do Lebanese VRChat players play VRChat, and what types of satisfactions do they gain from playing such a game? (Uses & Gratifications)
- 2) Does the male gaze transcend from the visual arts and literature into the virtual realm of Lebanese VRChat? (Gender Theory)
- 3) Can the achievement of becoming the ideal version of oneself in VRChat replace their need to do so in reality? (Gender Theory)
- 4) Are the avatars used by players in VRChat representations of their gender identity? (Gender Theory)
 - 1) **Hypothesis 1:** Spending time playing VRChat is more likely to drive one to release strong repressed emotions. (Catharsis)
 - 2) **Hypothesis 2:** Spending time playing VRChat increases an individual's ability to be more sociable with others. (Social Utility)
 - 3) **Hypothesis 3:** Spending time playing VRChat enables an individual to escape the tediousness of reality. (Escapism)
 - 4) **Hypothesis 4:** VRChat is more impactful in diverting one's attention from their harsh realities than other possible getaways. (Diversion)
 - 5) **Hypothesis 5:** An individual witnessing a certain activity performed by another player in VRChat enables them to learn how to perform said activity. (Vicarious Experience)
 - 6) **Hypothesis 6:** Characteristics observable about the male gaze is not only present in literature but also in the virtual gaming world. (Male Gaze)

- 7) **Hypothesis 7:** Avatars created by Lebanese players in VRChat are not usually representations of their ideal selves. (Ego Ideas)
- 8) **Hypothesis 8:** Toxic masculinity is observable not only in the real world but also within Lebanese players in VRChat. (Toxic Masculinity)
- 9) **Hypothesis 9:** Characteristics observable of one's gender identity in real life, are observed just as similarly in the world of VRChat. (Gender Identity)

4. Research Methodology

Qualitative research is a scientific method of observation to gather non-numerical data. This type of research focuses on the meanings, concepts, definitions, metaphors, symbols, and description of things rather than their numerical values and measures. Furthermore, qualitative research answers the questions of why and how a certain phenomenon may occur rather than how often (McLeod, 2019). Qualitative research focuses on obtaining data through open-ended and conversational communication, which allows for in-depth probing and questioning of respondents (Pathak, 2013). This in turn allows researchers to understand the underlying motivations and feelings of respondents towards a certain subject. The articles mentioned in the literature review section all seem to use general survey samples in order to obtain their results without studying the reasoning behind the respondents' choices. I seek to take a more in-depth view into the mind of a Lebanese VRChat player and find out what really motivates them to play in terms of their feelings, emotions, and personalities.

In this research paper, the concepts of catharsis, social utility, vicarious experience, escapism, diversion, the male gaze, and ego ideals will be studied qualitatively. Catharsis is a concept of the uses and gratifications theory, whereby one goes through the process of releasing and relieving themselves from strong or repressed emotions. This relates to my topic as it studies what kinds of repressed emotions my interviewees seek to release. Social utility is defined as the uses and benefits of a product or service that satisfies interpersonal needs, such as conformity, formation of personality, and individuality. Using this concept, I would like to find out whether VRChat has allowed my interviewees to enhance their social skills, and obtain new relationships, whether virtual, or real. In addition, vicarious experience is another concept of the uses and gratifications theory whereby one attaches their lives to the experience of another person. I would

like to use this concept to see whether my interviewees have obtained any new techniques through the observation of others. Furthermore, escapism is described as one who has the tendency to seek distractions and relief from unpleasant realities, especially by seeking entertainment or engaging in fantasy. Through utilizing this concept, I seek to find out exactly what my interviewees escape from when entering the realm of VRChat. The final concept of the uses and gratifications theory is diversion. It is the activity of diverting one's mind from tedious or serious concerns. Using this concept, I seek to understand why players choose VRChat as a diversion route in comparison to other possible types of routes.

As for gender theory, the male gaze is the act of depicting women from a masculine heterosexual perspective that represents women as objects for the pleasure of the male viewer. I use this concept to allow me to conclude whether this concept transcends into the virtual world as well. The second concept which I will use under gender theory is ego-ideals. Spectators who relate to on-screen characters and deem them better versions of themselves are coined as ego-ideals. I seek to use this concept to figure out whether or not my interviewees substitute their need to be a better version of themselves in the real world, by doing so in the virtual world, and why.

4.1 Sample

The type of sample to be used to conduct the qualitative research will be a non-probability snowball sample. The reasoning behind this selection is due to the fact that it is a strategic way for the researcher to make sure that the selected participants are indeed avid VRChat players and are comfortable enough to take part in in-depth conversations during the interview period. In order to obtain participants, the researcher will communicate with real-life associates in close proximity who are active VRChat players, and who are also capable of referring me to their associates who are active players as well. Introductory communication with participants will be established

through email, telephone, or text messages. This research seeks to obtain a sample of at least 10 participants in hopes of achieving saturation. The sample contains both males and females and serves the purpose of this research by locating whether the concepts of Gender Theory and Uses & Gratifications theory, transgress into the virtual realm of Lebanese VRChat. It is best to select participants who have committed to at least a couple of hours of in-game time since they will most likely have the experience and thus the capability to exclusively answer the interview questions in pristine quality.

4.2 Procedure

I will be using semi-structured in-depth interviews as one of my main tools for qualitative research. A semi-structured interview is a verbal interchange where the interviewer attempts to acquire information from another person through asking them questions (Longhurst, 2014). Even though the interviewer may have already prepared a set of predetermined questions, semi-structured interviews tend to unfold in a conversational manner thus providing participants with the opportunity to explore issues which they feel are important (Doyle, 2019). The main reason I utilize semi-structured interviews for my research is because I seek to elicit in-depth information from a small sample, consisting of 10 individuals. I want to understand their motivations, emotions, and reasoning behind playing VRChat through two-way communication, which is provided by semi-structured interviews.

In addition to semi-structured interviews, the researcher plans to conduct participant observation, whereby the selected participants will be observed in the settings of VRChat in which they have chosen. This methodology is utilized in order to obtain empathy and insight, enabling the researcher to observe the studied concepts in the shoes of the participants themselves. Another advantage includes the ability to assess the behavior of the participants in comparison to the

answers they provided during the interviews. This process enables the researcher to increase the validity of the research paper by reducing bias and allowing a live-action adventure with the participant where unfiltered opinions and behaviors may be observed.

4.3 Variables

This section will discuss the concepts explained in the theoretical framework along with their hypotheses, independent and dependent variables, and their operational and conceptual definitions.

The Uses & Gratifications Theory will be measured through the concepts of Catharsis, Social Utility, Escapism, Diversion, and Vicarious Experience.

Gender Theory will be measured through the concepts of Ego Ideals, the Male Gaze, Toxic Masculinity, and Gender Identity.

VRChat – This concept refers to A free-to-play massively multiplayer online virtual social reality platform. This will be measured by asking participants if they have ever played VRChat, as well as the amount hours per day they put into the game. The same independent variable is applied to the remaining hypotheses.

Catharsis - This concept refers to the process of releasing strong or repressed emotions. Catharsis will be measured by asking participants whether they have ever released pent-up or repressed emotions in VRChat.

Social Utility – This concept refers to one’s ability to be socially resourceful in terms of obtaining new relationships and enhancing social skills. This will be measured by asking participants if it easier to form relationships with individuals in VRChat or in real life.

Escapism – This concept refers to the tendency to seek distraction and relief from unpleasant realities. This will be measured by asking participants if VRChat is a method of escaping a boring reality.

Diversion – This concept refers to the activity of diverting one's mind from tedious or serious concerns. This will be measured by asking participants whether they prefer playing VRChat over other forms of distraction, such as alcohol or sports.

Vicarious Experience – This concept refers to the ability to observe the actions of others, learn them, and ultimately perform them. This will be measured asking participants if they have ever acquired a new skill from observing another player in VRChat.

Variable: Ego Ideals – This concept refers to one's desire to become the perfected version of themselves. This will be measured by asking participants whether their VRChat avatar personas are superior to their real-life identities.

Male Gaze – This concept refers to the act of depicting women in the visual arts and literature, as well as videogames, from a masculine heterosexual perspective that represents women as sexual objects for the pleasure of the heterosexual man. This will be measured by asking participants if they find erotic pleasure in gazing at other female avatars in VRChat.

Toxic Masculinity – This concept refers to one's set of traditional cultural masculine norms that can be harmful to men, women, and society overall through insult, degradation, and other means of abuse. This will be measured by asking participants whether they believe expressing emotion is a sign of weakness, and how they interact with women in terms of sexist jokes and aggression levels.

Gender Identity – This concept is defined as a personal conception of oneself as male or female. This conception is portrayed as the outward manifestations of personality, or their gender expression, that reflects their gender identity. This will be measured by asking participants whether they are more comfortable expressing themselves in the real world or in the online world, how, and why.

4.4 Data Analysis

Since the research approach is qualitative, the analysis of the interviews and participant observation data will be categorized thematically with regards to the main theories being studied. The interviews will be initially transcribed in order to be studied more acutely through a number of distinct categories. Following this step, the researcher will attempt to draw relationships between interviewees to figure out any sort of associations. The data will then be analyzed in comparison to the previous studies mentioned in the literature review, in order to determine which results have differed, or remained the same, and why. Utilizing the thematic approach, the researcher will be able to locate common themes and ideas within the participants' responses in order to confirm or refute the allocated hypothesis. Once this process is complete, and upon further analysis of the qualitative data, the researcher will be able to draw appropriate responses to the allocated research questions. In addition, the notes acquired from participant observation will be cross compared to the answers obtained from the interviewees.

5. Results and Findings

The conducted analysis provided an abundance of interesting findings which were used to validate or deny a series of hypotheses.

5.1 Emotional Release

Hypothesis 1 indicates that spending time playing VRChat is more likely to drive one to release strong repressed emotions. In order to validate or deny this hypothesis, participants were asked whether they have any repressed emotions, why they may have them, and in which ways they tend to release them. For organizational purposes, participants were numbered P1 through P10, or participants one through ten. P2, P3, and P8 are the female participants. Although the reasons varied from one participant to the other, stress and anxiety were common among P1, P2, P4, P7, and P9. To illustrate, P1 deals with stress due to the heavy pressure of his academic load, as well as the fear that he may not acquire a successful future. P2 states that it is the deteriorating Lebanese economy that is the root of her stress, she worries that one day her parents may not be able to pay their medical bills. P4 states that his parents fight and argue a significant amount and this in turn causes him stress. P7 states that it is the ongoing pressure of his job that causes his anxiety, and P9 states that his lack of success in life is what causes his anxiety. Thus it was interpreted by the researcher that one of the main themes that has emerged from this research is the theme of *anxiety*. P5, P8, and P10 responded with sadness and depression when asked about the repressed emotions that they handle. P5 hints that his lack of self-esteem is the main root of his sadness. P8 states that his lack of friends at the moment is what causes hers, and P10 states that it is the added effects of COVID 19 and the Lebanese economy that is the root of this. Thus the researcher confirms that another interpreted theme is that of *depression*. The remaining participants, P3 and P6, indicated frustration to be their most formidable repressed emotion. P3

and P6 both stated that it is the deteriorating state of Lebanon that causes their frustration, thus in addition to the theme of *frustration*, the theme of *deteriorated living standards* was also detected by the researcher.

When asked whether VRChat was their preferred outlet to release these pent up and repressed emotions, all of them sans participant 7 answered with a yes. Some examples include P4 who prefers VRChat as an outlet for repressed emotions because he may commit violence under safe circumstances in release of his stress. P10 hints that it is his sense of belonging that pulls him away from the depression he feels on a daily basis, due to his comfort of having VRChat as a second home along with his online friends. Similarly, VRChat is the go-to outlet for P5 who deals with sadness by helping others who feel the same way as himself. Thus, it can be interpreted that hypothesis 1 is validated, because not only do all participants hold on to these repressed emotions, but all of them, excluding participant 7, found VRChat to be the preferred place to release their emotions of anxiety, anger, and frustration. The findings for hypothesis 1 correlate with the article “Video Game Uses and Gratifications as Predictors of Use and Game Preference” by John L. Sherry, Kristen Lucas, who concluded that games are frequently used to avoid stress or responsibilities, whereby gamers use this leisure in order to fill time, relax, or escape.

5.2 Social Connections

Hypothesis 2 indicates that spending time playing VRChat increases an individual’s ability to be more sociable with others. To validate or deny this hypothesis, participants were asked how many friends they have in VRChat and how they made them, whether or not VRChat has helped them build their social skills, and whether it easier to make friends in VRChat than in real life. Although the reasons varied from one participant to the other, 8 of 10 participants answered yes on whether they have made friends in VRChat. Examples include participant 1 who mentions that

although he's not a sociable person, he did make friends with people on VRChat who approached him. Participant 2 states that she's made a significant number of friends on VRChat and that she enjoys talking to people, she further states that it is one of the main reasons she joined VRChat in the first place. Participant 4 mentions that he usually joins VRChat for the games and scenery, so he has not made any friends on VRChat. P6 mentions that he only plays VRChat with his real life friends, and prefers to stick to his group, so he has not come to make any new friends on VRChat. Going through the responses of the participants, there are two main themes that have emerged, identified under Timothy J. Legg's "Extroverts, Introverts, and Everything in Between", thus the identified themes are *introversion and extroversion*. To be more specific, some participants such as P1, P6, and P7 displayed signs of introversion, such as shyness, and being overall reserved. The remaining participants showed signs of extroversion, such as P2 who claims one of the main reasons she even plays VRChat is because of her ability to make friends, and P8 who associates her extroversion with her ability to talk to random strangers. From the following data, the researcher interprets that extroverted participants have an easier time making friends than introverted participants, but that does not mean that introverted participants are unable to make friends in VRChat.

When asked how VRChat has helped participants build their social skills, all 10 participants indicated that VRChat has done so in one form or the other. For example, P1 claims VRChat has helped him with his shyness, while also helping P9 with their ability to work on their communication skills. P5 feels more confident in his social skills after talking with people in VRChat. P3 feels that she has become more fluent in speaking English with other English speakers in VRChat. Similarly, P4 and P9 state that VRChat has also improved their communication skills through observing and listening to others converse, which in turn has added more conversation

topics to their arsenal. These criteria fall under the theme of *communication*, which correlates to the article “The Benefits of Playing Video Games” by authors Isabela Granic, Adam Lobel, and Rutger Engels in that through the course of gaming, players obtain important prosocial skills when they play games that are specifically designed to reward effective cooperation, support, and helping behaviors. When asked whether it is easier to make friends in real life or in VRChat, 6 of 10 participants claimed that it is, whereas the remaining had a different opinion. To illustrate, P1 states that it is easier for him to make new friends in VRChat because he’s hidden behind her avatar, stating that “the people online don’t see the real me.” P2 and P3 both state that they play VRChat due to VRChat being a social game itself, in which one of the main reason people play ordinarily is to make friends. P4 states that making friends in either VRChat or real life both have their advantages and disadvantages, but further mentions that he can say and do whatever he wants online without repercussions. “I think it’s the same difficulty, because in real life speaking you have some advantages in conversation and in online speaking you have advantages, like I can see body language in real life but in an online I can say whatever I want without repercussions” P4 says. Similarly, P5 mentions that it is easier for him to make friends in VRChat because he gets to hide behind is avatar, P6 mentions that it easier for him because VRChat feels like a safe-zone. Thus the researcher interprets a new theme being the *avatar as a mask*, in which participants feel more comfortable to express themselves because of a seemingly protective barricade. With this being said, it can be deduced that hypothesis 2 is validated, since most participants have admitted an increase in their social ability due to VRChat, as well as showcasing their capacity to make their own friends in VRChat.

5.3 Escaping Reality

Hypothesis 3 indicates that spending time playing VRChat enables an individual to escape the tediousness of reality. To validate or deny this hypothesis, participants were asked if they tend to withdraw from reality through VRChat rather than other outlets, and why. All but one participant answered yes to this question, and below are some examples. P1 mentions that that he prefers VRChat as an escape from reality because it acts a safe zone, where he can express his thoughts and feelings away from judgement. P2 states that she prefers VRChat as her escape route because it gives her the means to perform actions that cannot be commonly done among other outlets. She further explains by mentioning that it is more immersive and grasping for her to jump off a skyscraper atop a flying horse in VRChat than to lift weights at a gym. P4 says that VRChat is his preferred escape route because he can do things in VRChat that would be illegal in the real world, such as shooting people, animals, and stealing cars. P4 says: "...it's all okay because it's virtual and just a game so I won't get in trouble". P5 mentions that he is able to escape through VRChat due to the grasping aspect of virtual reality. P5 says "I put these goggles on and it's like I'm on a whole different world, I can almost touch it." The same phenomenon is once again observed with participants 6 and 9. When asked why VRChat is their preferred escape route, P6 says it does the best job at making him see virtual things as if they were happening in reality. "It is the only game that comes close to somewhat convincing me that I'm actually in a whole new world" P6 says. P9 says that VRChat is also the preferred escape route for him because it is the most immersive. He explains the realism he feels by describing the assembling of a rifle:

I really love guns and VRChat is the closest at making me feel like I'm actually using them.

I love to break down guns piece by piece, and learn how they work on the inside. I'm actually kind of surprised when I take off the VR goggles and the gun isn't actually there.

A clear pattern is observed by the researcher. The above mentioned participants all preferred VRChat due its immersion, and its ability to trick them into believing in a fantasy world, which has come to be coined under the theme of the *otherworldly*. This theme of the *otherworldliness* correlates with the findings in the article “Video Game Uses and Gratifications as Predictors of Use and Game Preference” by John L. Sherry and Kristen Lucas (2016), who state that videogames introduce the fantasy motivation to their players. This trait explains that video games allow players to experience things that they normally would not be able to try out, such as driving race cars, or flying, which in turn allows them a route of escape. Since 9 of 10 participants answered to having VRChat as an escape route, and since the majority of participants explained how they prefer VRChat as their main route of escape, hypothesis 3 can be considered validated.

5.4 Problem Avoidance

Hypothesis 4 indicates that VRChat is more impactful in diverting one’s attention from their harsh realities than other possible getaways. To validate or deny this hypothesis, participants were asked what problems in their daily life lead them to deviate into the realm of VRChat. All 10 participants indicated some relation to deviating from their problems through the use of VRChat. To be more specific, P1 states that he has a lot of studying to do in real life, and exams cause him a lot of stress, so he finds VRChat to be an easy place to hop on and relax. P2 states that she deals with a lot of stress on a daily basis due to the economy in Lebanon. P2 specifically says: “...especially with the economy in Lebanon right now it’s impossible to relax. VRChat is free to play and I always have a laugh while playing.” P3 states that she has to spend most of her time at home due to the fear of transmitting COVID19 to her parents. This in turn makes life feel dull for her and thus she seeks VRChat because it is directly available to her and free to play. P4 states that his parents argue and fight a lot, which in turn makes him extremely anxious, and further mentions

that he prefers VRChat because he is free to do whatever he pleases. P5 states that he suffers from loneliness, and that he prefers to divert to VRChat because it is guaranteed that he will find someone to talk to. P6 adds that that his life is very boring at the moment, due to the economic situation in Lebanon as well as COVID. P7 states that the main issue he deals with is stress from work. “Sometimes the workload just becomes too much, and I can’t find much inspiration or motivation, so my go-to is VRChat, it just gives me some mental relaxation.” P8 states that the real world can get pretty dull, especially with all the work she has to do. “Sometimes I just need a break from everything in the real world, all work and no play is pretty dull as they say. So I hop onto VRChat and mess around with my avatar, it usually helps”. P9 states that sometimes he just needs some alone time, needing a break from his friends, colleagues, and parents. He adds that VRChat is the safest place to do that. “I just want to be alone, away from my parents, friends, and colleagues, and VRChat to me is the safest place to do that. As soon as I refuel I can just go back to real life.” P10 states that sometimes he simply does not have the energy for the real world, especially in the current situation in Lebanon. “I just don’t have enough energy for the real world, especially in these bad times. My PC is right there every time I wake up, so VRChat at this point has just become a habit.” When analyzing the participant responses, the same themes analyzed in hypothesis 1, anxiety and depression, also play their role in hypothesis 4. In addition, looking back at the findings of hypothesis 3, where most participants agreed that VRChat is their go to outlet for emotional release, and seeing as to how the majority of participants view VRChat as a route of deviation from their problems, it can be deduced that hypothesis 4 is validated. However, another theme is prevalent here. Seeing as to how 6 participants answered with the Lebanese economy and COVID 19 as their main issues in life, the theme of the *detrimental effects of the Lebanese economy* was identified as highly recurrent.

5.5 Social Learning

Hypothesis 5 indicates that an individual witnessing a certain activity performed by another player in VRChat enables them to learn how to perform said activity. To validate or deny this hypothesis, participants were asked what techniques they have learned by observing others in the realm of VRChat. P1 says he learned how to manually reload a pistol because he came across another player who was quite familiar with the craft. “He showed us in the game how to pull out the magazine, put bullets in it, and then reload it, it was very cool, and safe of course because it’s online.” P2 states that she learned how to make an Indian dish. “There was a nice Indian guy who apparently works as a chef and he taught me the recipe using in-game food objects.” P3 states that she learned an abundance of medical safety techniques such as CPR. P4 says that he came across a female VRChat player who happened to be an international chess competitor. “She taught me how the game was played by virtually carrying the pieces with her avatar, it was really cool.” P5 states that he learned new techniques to improve his artistic skills. P5 specifically says:

I was in a painting server and saw this player who was drawing beautiful trees on a virtual canvas, and since I like to sketch as a hobby I observed what they did and started to draw using the same lines on my real life papers.

P6 says that through observing another VRChat player, he was able to learn how to play a few notes on the piano. “I was in a music server where people could play random instruments and there was this perfectly tuned piano, the player taught me the C-minor and C-Major chords.” P7 says he learned how to tie specific survival knots through observing another player in a zombie-survival server.

I learned how to tie a specific survival knot for a large tent, because we were in a zombie server and it was my duty to set up shelter. There was a player who apparently did some time in the US military, and he easily showed me how to tie the knot step by step.

P8 says that she attended an IKEA event in VRChat, where she learned how to assemble one of IKEA's tables step by step. P9 states that he did not learn anything new in VRChat. P10 says that he was able to learn how to throw a boxing punch in self-defense. "I learned something really cool, there was this boxing server and apparently there was this player roleplaying as a coach, whether he's real or fake I don't know, but he showed me how to throw a left hook." Seeing as to how 9 of the 10 participants claimed to have learned something new through observing another player, hypothesis 5 can be deemed validated along with the theme of *learning by seeing*. The findings in hypothesis 5 correlate to the findings in the article titled "The Benefits of Playing Video Games" by authors Isabela Granic, Adam Lobel, and Rutger Engels, who mention that research indicates that playing games promotes a wide range of cognitive skills.

5.6 The Male Gaze

Hypothesis 6 indicates that characteristics observable about the male gaze is not only present in literature but also in the virtual gaming world. To validate or deny this hypothesis, participants were asked three questions:

- Whether or not they played as a female avatar and why.
- What the first unfiltered thought that comes to their mind when they see a female avatar
- Whether females in VRChat are portrayed sexually, or not, and how that makes them feel.

Regarding question 1, two of the three female participants answered yes to using a female avatar, each for their own reasons. To illustrate, P2 says: “Yes, I always play as a female avatar because I’m a girl and I like to customize my character with a nice fashion style.” P3 who is also female says: “I usually only play as a female avatar because I think it’s weird to use a male-looking avatar when I’m actually a girl, I feel like I’m being fake.” P8 who was the female participant who does not like to play as a female avatar says: “I actually tend to stay away from using female avatars because in every server I go to female avatars are usually harassed and spoken to sexually even though sometimes it’s in fact a man using the female avatar.” As for the remaining male participants, P4 indicates that he actually prefers to play as a female avatar because he enjoys looking at the female physique, referring to them as “eye candy.” P4 specifically says “in all honesty I prefer to use a female avatar because it’s like eye candy you know? Nice uh.... physique... if you know what I mean”. P5, P6, and P7 have not played VRChat using a female avatar, however, P6 hints at using female avatars as a sexual means to achieve a goal through seduction. P6 specifically says:

...It never crossed my mind to play as a female character but now that I think about it it’s kind of a funny idea. Like I can walk up to someone like to seduce them and then speak with a man’s voice.

P9 states that he uses female avatars a lot. P9 specifically says: “I mainly use female avatars because looking at a male’s body after many hours makes it kind of boring and weird. It’s nice to look at a girl’s body, it makes me enjoy the game more.” P10 also prefers to play a female avatar, however based on his response there does not seem to be traces of sexual objectivity. P10 specifically mentions: “Yeah I have played as a female avatar before, like Lara Croft from Tomb Raider because I really like that series.” Regarding question one, traces of the male gaze are already

starting to become apparent. P4 and P9 answered that it is staring at specific female body parts that gives them joy. P6 mentions that female avatars are fun to play as because they can be used in some form of seduction. Even P8 who is female is uncomfortable using a female avatar because they are often harassed and sexually spoken to.

Question 2 was utilized to further distinct participants with inclinations to objectify female VRChat players from those who do not. Participants with neutral stand points were P1, P2, P3, P5, P7, P8, and P10. Below are some examples of their responses. P1 states that nothing really comes to mind when seeing a female avatar, they view them as simply another player. P2 explains that she gets excited because it is easier for her to approach avatars that are female. P7 states that he would most probably wave at them purely out of manners before continuing with his business. On the other hand, P4 mentions specifically: "My first thought is to assess how sexy they are, if I like what I see I will probably approach immediately." P6 says: "I mean if I had to be honest the first thing that comes to mind is how attractive the avatar is". P9 says: "Usually when the female avatar is attractive I imagine some sexual fantasies, but it's normal like I'm a guy after all." All three answers indicate some sort of sexual correlation between these male participants and female VRChat avatars, only due to the fact that they are female. It is also important to note participant 8 who is wary about even the female avatars she comes across. P8 says: "My first thought would probably be to be wary of the avatar because it is very likely that there is a man posing behind it." This answer further fortifies the presence of some form of sexual objectivity. Question 3 asks whether female avatars are portrayed sexually in VRChat, and how each participant personally feels about that. This question helps the researcher in cementing the presence of the male gaze, or else deeming it non-existent.

All 10 participants indicating to some extent the sexual portrayal of female VRChat avatars. Some participants expressed this portrayal more than others, but the answer was a yes among all participants nevertheless. Delving deeper into the participant responses, the researcher observed that 7 of the 10 participants who indicated the presence of this sexual portrayal found it to be ethically wrong. Some went as far as coining these portrayals as disgusting. However, participants 4, 6, and 9, who were emphasized in question 2, were more than delighted with these sexual portrayals. To be more specific, P4 says: “I mean I don’t see a lot of half-naked avatars but I definitely enjoy the times that I do”. P6 says: “I think so, yes, because wherever I go there’s always some flirty stuff happening. Once I saw two giant female anime avatars with bulging breasts, it was nice to look at”. P9 mentions: “Yes they are and that’s amazing! It motivates to play VRChat more because I get to see so many beautiful and exotic women”. These findings correlate directly to the theoretical definition of the male gaze, explained by author Laura Mulvey in her article titled “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” which states that the male gaze is the depiction of women as sexual objects for the presence of the heterosexual male viewer. The main theme to be coined from the participant responses for all three questions is *sexual degradation*. Thus, the researcher concludes that although not very prominent, the male gaze has found its way into the realms of the virtual world, specifically in the video game of VRChat.

5.7 Ego Ideals

Hypothesis 7 indicates that avatars created by Lebanese players in VRChat are not usually representations of their ideal selves. To validate or deny this hypothesis, participants were asked if their avatars represented better versions of themselves, and whether or not those avatars were superior to their real selves, and how. All but one participant admitted to having their avatar as the superior version of themselves. To illustrate, P1 responded by saying: “I would say so, my avatar

is tall, handsome, and brave, all things that I find difficult doing in real life”. P2 says: “Sadly my avatar is a better version of myself, she’s just beautiful, and shiny and filled with light, unlike myself who isn’t so pretty or attention grabbing.” P3 mentions that her avatar is definitely a better version of herself because the avatar is more fit and muscular, while she remains not as attractive.

P6 says:

...yeah my avatar definitely represents a better version of myself because he’s a successful racecar driver, people always give my avatar complements on the way he looks and the high scores he achieves in racing games. In real life I’m just a lazy gamer.

P7 is the only participant who states that he does not think that this avatar is a better version of himself, and claims the opposite. P8, although reluctant to admit her response, states that her avatar is in fact a better version of herself since her avatar has already reached the pinnacle of success. “...She also has jewelry on her that are worth so much in VRChat currency, a prestige I don’t get to have in real life” P8 says. P9 specifically states: “...Yeah my avatar is like 10 times the person I am because my avatar is already a mafia boss, popular and feared, in real life I can barely get an internship”. Finally, P10 shares that he also thinks his avatar represents a superior version of himself mainly due to the avatar’s greater physical capabilities. P10 says: “My avatar is a well-known knight, and a great fighter, the only good physical aspect of me is that I play football well.”

These responses indicate that the hypothesis is not validated. This is due to the fact that Lebanese VRChat players do create their avatars in representation of their ideal selves, thus cementing the presence of the concept of ego ideals under gender theory within the virtual world. Many of the respondents were reluctant to admit their avatars as being superior, appearing somewhat shy or embarrassed. These findings introduce the concept of the *lacking of self-esteem*.

These findings also oppose the acquired results of Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz (2009) in her article titled “The Effects of the Sexualization of Female Video Game Characters on Gender Stereotyping and Female Self-Concept”, which concluded that there is no relation between the sexualization of female characters and self-esteem; whereas it was directly present in this thesis.

5.8 Toxic Masculinity

Hypothesis 8 indicates that toxic masculinity is observable not only in the real world but also within Lebanese players in the virtual realm of VRChat. To validate or deny this hypothesis, participants were asked whether or not they would be comfortable crying in front of people as men, whether they feel like it is okay to cry in VRChat or not, and how they handled verbal altercations with women in VRChat. As for question one, 7 of the 10 participants indicated that they would not be comfortable crying in public for their own personal reasons. Some of these examples include P1 who states: “I usually don’t like to show my emotions in public, I just feel like it makes me vulnerable to insults and stuff like that.” On the contrary, P2 who is female states: “Yes of course I’d be okay with it, I’m not one to really hide my emotions, I don’t wear a mask, what you see is what I am”. P3 who is also female states: “I don’t like to cry in public because I feel like I would be made fun of, also I look very ugly when I’m crying”. P4 states: “I would never ever cry in public, I feel like that’s what girls do. As a man I have the duty to show strength and be a leader for others.” P6 and P9 both respond similarly to P4, stating that they definitely would not cry in public because people will presume them to be weak and cowardly. P7 does not like to cry in public out of fear of judgement, stating specifically: “...I really don’t think there’s anything wrong in doing that. I guess I personally just don’t want people to judge me”. P8 who is female exhibits symptoms similar to P4 and, P6, and P9, stating that she does not like to cry in public

because it degrades her as a woman. She says: “I should stay strong and lady-like”. P2, P5 and P10 do not have issues with crying in public.

Taking into account the above findings, it is observable that although most participants are not comfortable crying in public, the reasons behind this play a role in identifying traits of toxic masculinity. To be more specific, P1 and P7 are not comfortable crying in public specifically due to the fact that they may be insulted or judged. On the other hand, P4, P6, and P9 perceive the act of crying as an act of weakness. This is to say that showing emotion, with regards to P4, P6, and P9, is a sign of weakness, which is a direct trait described in the concept of gender theory. These findings correlate directly to the concept of toxic masculinity as defined by Michael Kimmel, who stated: “someone who exhibits toxic masculinity will usually show signs of aggression, sexual aggression and control, suppressed emotions, hyper-competitiveness, low empathy, and entitlement”. These phenomena are directly observable among participants P4, P6, and P9. Participant 8 provides an interesting perspective. She too, as the previous 3 participants, associates strength with the ability to avoid crying. Whether this trait is a result of oppression throughout the years, or simply a sign of what may be deemed as toxic femininity, is a concept that can be further studied in the future.

Moving on to question 2, it becomes observable that participants who were previously uncomfortable crying in public, are in fact more comfortable crying in the virtual realm of VRChat. To illustrate, participants 1 and 7 who did not portray signs of toxic masculinity have admitted to being more comfortable doing so in VRChat. P1 says: “I think VRChat is like a safe-haven sort of thing. I can cry and feel good doing so because there’s no one there to really make fun of me”. P7 says: “I have actually cried in VRChat once, it wasn’t as bad as I thought, but I definitely will not do so in public because I feel like in real life its way more embarrassing”. Even P6 and P9, who

previously portrayed signs of toxic masculinity, have admitted to being more comfortable when playing behind the screen. P6 mentions: "...Well because the players in VRChat don't know my real identity, it makes it easier for me to cry in that regard", and P9 says: "Honestly, it's kind of therapeutic to cry in VRChat because I keep down a lot of my emotions in my daily routines. And there's always someone around VRChat to talk to so I can feel better". These findings relate to the theme coined in the findings of hypothesis 2, *avatar as a mask*, whereby participants succumb to a sense of safety whilst using their avatars as a form of cover.

Moving on to the third question, 8 of 10 participants admitted to arguing with female players, including the female participants. The researcher observed that even though most male participants argued with females, the only ones who did so uncivilly were the participants who displayed traits of toxic masculinity. To be specific, participant 10 who does not display signs of toxic masculinity says: "I have gotten into arguments with females in VRChat, usually about political matters such as Lebanese elections, but I always make sure to stay respectful, saying things like: I respect your opinion but... and, we can agree to disagree". P4, P6, and P9 take a more uncivilized approach in their arguments. P4 says: "Yeah I argue with a lot of girls on VRChat, I know it's not really right now that I think about it but I've called them fat and weak, especially when they would reject me." P6 says:

I got into an argument with this group of girls once because they were blocking my avatar from entering a room in a nightclub server. I kept asking them to move, go away, and when they wouldn't I would call them bad insults like the b-word.

P9 says: "Yeah I've had arguments with some girls in VRChat, they thought they were better than me at puzzle solving and math games and I kept telling them that I could easily beat them because men are just naturally smarter and more intelligent". Thus it can be concluded that

although the number of participants who displayed signs of masculinity were the minority in this research, hypothesis 8 is validated since toxic masculinity is a phenomenon displayed and observed by Lebanese individuals in the realm of VRChat.

5.9 Gender Identity

Finally, hypothesis 9 indicates that characteristics observable of one's gender identity in real life, are observed just as similarly in the world of VRChat. To validate or deny this hypothesis, participants were asked:

- What characteristics compose their masculine and feminine traits.
- Whether they are more comfortable expressing these masculine and feminine traits in real life versus VRChat.
- Whether the avatar they use in VRChat is a representation of their own masculinity/femininity

Starting with question 1, the researcher observed a variety of responses brought forth by the participants. Regardless of the various responses, this question still fulfilled its goal of confirming that Lebanese participants do associate specific actions and characteristics with being feminine and masculine. Thus, the researcher concludes that the phenomenon of gender identity is already present among Lebanese VRChat players in their real lives. A few examples include P1 who says: "I feel like being generally a good person, and being courageous is what generally makes up my masculinity". This statement shows that P1 associates masculinity with good ethics and courage. P2 who is female states: "My femininity is associated with how kind and helpful I am; I like to be there for others especially when they're feeling down". Thus it is observed that P2 associates kindness and helpfulness with femininity. The remaining participants exhibit similar responses. P3 says: "I would say my femininity has to do with how empathetic I am. I always feel bad if I

hurt someone's feelings even on accident and I'm always trying to make things better. I also like to keep a positive mindset for me and the people around me". P4 says: "What makes up my masculinity is my drive to be better than others in every single thing I do. Also, I feel like being emotionally indestructible and aggressive with those who wrong me is what makes me manly". This response is interesting because P4 who also exhibits signs of toxic masculinity seems to have it already integrated into his proclaimed gender identity. P5 states: "I feel like being a supportive person and being emotionally there for others is the best part of me as a man". P6 mentions: "What makes me masculine is to remain in control of myself and others when I need to be. I'm also very competitive even with small things like being the best tarneeb player between my friends". Once again, similar to P4, a common phenomenon is observable. P7 states: "What makes me a man is being a logical and rational individual, especially with the ability to tell right from wrong. I feel like courage and risk-taking is also an important part of my masculinity". P8 who is female says: "I feel like being independent is the biggest part of my femininity. I like to know that I am completely able to rely on myself financially and emotionally. I also think being a risk-taker is important to my femininity". P9 exhibits the same criteria as P4 and P6 as he states:

For me to be a man I need to always be one of the smartest people in the room. I also need to make sure I maintain hold of my emotions and never show them because that is a sign of weakness. I need to remain strong, this is how I was brought up.

P10 on the other hand mentions:

I think what makes me a man is to be civil and understanding, as well as constructive and kind. Not every guy has to be the toughest guy in the room or the strongest, you can simply be a nice person and still manly, that's just my opinion.

Through analyzing and coding these responses, the researcher coins the theme of *The Rational Man versus The Rash Man*. To illustrate, P4, P6, and P9 relate masculinity to strength, control, and dominance. Whereas participants such P1, P5, P7, and P10 relate masculinity to being rational, logical, supportive, kind, and fair. The following theme directly relates to the ideas theorized by Bridges (Bridges, 2020) who stated: “masculinity composes quite a spectrum; it cannot be referred to as though it were a timeless essence common amongst all men.” This is to say that instead of having a single form of masculinity, there is instead many masculinities.

Regarding question 2, all but one participant admitted to being more comfortable expressing their masculinity and femininity in VRChat rather than their real lives. Many of the previously coined themes by the researcher are present in the participant responses. To be more specific, P1 says: “I’m more comfortable expressing my masculinity in VRChat for sure, because it’s easy to do brave things in VRChat, like argue with a bunch of bullies or fight off a virtual shark that can’t hurt me in real life”. Within this response the theme of the *otherworldliness* is present. Participants 2, 4, 5, 8, and 9 all propose the idea of feeling “safe” within the boundaries of the virtual world, and behind their screens. Some examples include P2 who states:

..I always feel safe behind my avatar. It doesn’t let people see the real me, so I know that once I get back to my real life, anything that happened in VRChat whether it’s something good or bad will remain there.

P5 similarly states: “It’s always easier to express in VRChat, because my avatar is like a mask, no one can see what’s behind the mask and I’m free to do whatever I want”. Thus, the previously themed coin of the *avatar as a mask* is once again prevalent.

As for the third question, all but 1 participant admitted to having an avatar which represents aspects of their masculinity and femininity. Some examples include P1 who says: “My avatar is

definitely a representative of my masculinity, because I built him to look similar to superman, who is known for his strength and courage”. P3 says: “Totally, I designed my avatar to have a giant pink heart shape at the center of her chest, making her a beacon of comfort and love, at least that’s what I hope people see.” P5 says: “Now that I think about it I do think my avatar is a representative of my masculinity because I look to support people in real life and make them better, and my avatar looks like a doctor with the white coat and everything”. Similarly, P8 mentions that her avatar “looks like an absolute queen”, or an avatar with plentiful jewelry and high-end clothing, and thus it is a representation of her femininity in terms of prestige and independence. Participant 9 says that his avatar does represent his masculinity, as his character is a mafia boss who does not show emotion and is always the smartest and most dangerous man in the room. P10 on the other hand states that his avatar represents his masculinity because it is a medieval white knight, known for honor, helpfulness, and strength. Based on the responses of 3 questions posed by the researcher, it was observed that all participants connect their masculinity and femininity with specific traits and characteristics. It was also observed that most participants were more comfortable expressing these traits in VRChat rather than the real world. It was also verified that the traits which form the gender identities of the participants found their way in the composition of the participant’s VRChat avatar. Thus it can be concluded that hypothesis 9 is validated, since the characteristics which compose one's gender identity in real life, were observed similarly in the realm of VRChat.

Participants were further analyzed using the participant observation research methodology to obtain more information about their responses

P1 acted as mentioned in his responses. P1 was not observed in any confrontation whatsoever, and instead allocated his time to pleasurable activities with players on VRChat. These activities ranged from gaming to socializing, and anything in between. P1 acted similarly with

female avatars as he did with male avatars, showing no signs of aggression or disrespect. P1, as observed by the researcher, appears to be shy and timid. These traits were present during the participant observation portion of the research. To be specific, P1 usually would not speak unless spoken to, and would tend to shy away from confrontation even in a joking context. All answers provided by participant 1 did not show signs of dishonesty.

P2 acted as mentioned in her responses for the most part. P2 was observed arguing with female avatars, although not as solemnly as mentioned in her interview. To be more specific, P2 mentioned that she would undertake a more civil approach when in confrontation with female participants, however insults and slurs were exchanged in these situations multiple times. P2 appeared to be more excited and lively when playing VRChat compared to her calm and composed attitude during the interview. The researcher correlates this change in behavior with the previously coined theory: *avatar as a mask*. Besides the question regarding female altercations, P2 displayed honest responses overall.

P3 provided honest answers for the most part with regards to the interview questions. She displayed no signs of aggression when arguing with female avatars. P3 remained as calm in-game as she appeared to be in the live interview session, with very few confrontations. The only noticeable difference between P3's actions on VRChat in comparison to her answers is the variety of utilized avatars. To illustrate, instead of utilizing the avatar mentioned in her responses, or the fairy healer avatar, P3 also utilized the character "Vi" from the all-popular multiplayer videogame "League of Legends"; however, such avatars utilized by P3 were usually in the context of flaunting, which does not provide adequate criteria to determining the various aspects of P3's personality.

Many of the responses P4 provided during the interview sessions were present during participant observation. However, many of the provided responses were also condensed versions of the actions that P4 undertakes in the realm of VRChat. To illustrate, P4 would not only refer to confronted female avatars as “fat” or “weak”, but would also cast a series of sexist jokes and comments. For example, P4 stated: “women are only useful when making my sandwiches.” Similar to P3, P4 depicted a much more aberrant and ecstatic behavior than what was displayed to the researcher in the live interviews. Regarding the remaining provided responses by P4, the researcher observes general inaccuracies, but not completely dishonesty.

P5 did not display behavior similar to the responses provided in the live interviews. P5 displayed an overall passive aggressive attitude when arguing with women, and even casted a series of degrading and sexual comments. To be more specific, P5, after a lengthy argument with a female avatar, stated: “Your boobs are too small anyway, they can’t please anyone”. P5 displayed a much more aggressive attitude in VRChat than what was displayed to the researcher during the interview session. Besides the altercations that P5 had with women in VRChat, other examples of dishonesty were not observed.

P6 was extremely honest with the answers provided during the interviews. P6 would shamelessly throw out insults both seriously and humorously. He would act in aberrant behavior with both males and females. P6 seemed to have a similar attitude during the interview session as he did during the VRChat participant observation. To be more specific, P6 was outgoing and bombastic, speaking his mind with little regard to what he is saying or who the people around him are.

P7 appeared honest in his responses to the posed interview questions. P7 was never observed in the midst of a confrontation or argument. In fact, it was observed that P7 would put

more of an effort in avoiding conflict. To clarify, P7 did not get into any altercations with neither men nor women, and instead observed such arguments from a safe position. Similar to P1, P7 appeared as shy and timid to the researcher, and exhibited similar behavior in his VRChat adventures.

P8 was also honest with most of her responses, only showing small traces of inaccuracy similar to P4. P8 stated in her interview responses that she took part in altercations with other women in VRChat. The researcher is able to confirm that such arguments took part during the post-interview participant observation in VRChat. The mentioned inaccuracy refers to specific words exchanged during these altercations, or the level of civility. To illustrate, P8 would elicit a series of insults against the confronted party, speaking slurs and insults far beyond those mentioned in the participant interview. In the eyes of the researcher, P8 exhibited similar behavior in her interview when compared to VRChat, exhibiting personality traits such as proudness and pride.

P9 was honest with most of his responses, but his behavior in VRChat indicated a few personality traits that were deemed inaccurate by the researcher when compared to P9's interview responses. To be more specific, P9 appeared to be confident, crude, and even a little rude when analyzing P9's responses. However, when finding himself in altercations with women, P9 would not act as aberrantly as proclaimed in his interview responses, finding ways to deescalate the situation and remaining as respectful as possible. The reasoning behind such behavior could be credited to a possible variation in mood or even a change in mindset; however, the answers remain uncertain.

P10 was honest with all his responses. P10 handled altercations with women respectfully, always finding ways to transfer his ideas and hear others with least resistance, even when discussing political matters of extreme sensitivity. P10 was also honest with his avatar selection,

or the white knight, as mentioned in his responses. P10 maintained a gentle and perceptive attitude both in the interview sessions and during the participant observation portions in VRChat.

6. Limitations and Conclusion

6.1 Limitations

This section of the research paper seeks to discuss the limitations faced by the researcher due to the methodology chosen. The sample to be utilized consists of a small-scale amount of 10 individuals. Although this sample will be able to provide readers with an accurate preliminary image of the Lebanese VRChat population, we are incapable of generalizing the results of this research to the entire population of Lebanese VRChat gamers. In addition, although snowball sampling fits the goals of this research paper in terms of acquiring honest and in-depth answers from participants, it may nevertheless introduce error to the research through bias.

6.2 Conclusion

This section of the paper seeks to summarize the most influential findings of the paper, as well as explaining how it is relevant to literature. Much was learned from the results and findings section. The researcher could deduce that different people gratify themselves in different ways, even if the gratification is of the same theoretical concept. For example, during catharsis, one may indulge in helping others online, and another may indulge in shooting others online, all to achieve the same gratification, as portrayed by the participants. It was interesting to see how the participants coped with their realities, and what motivated them to do so.

Many important themes were apparent throughout the research. The most interesting of which being the themes of otherworldliness and the avatar as a mask. It was very interesting to see how participants could change in behavior so drastically when being able to disclose their identities

online. It was also interesting to see how drastically Lebanese VRChat players craved an escape from their realities due to the detrimental effects of the Lebanese economy.

The male gaze, although minimal, was able to plant its roots in the virtual realm, when previously only thought to have existed in literature and the visual arts. It was also interpreted that most participants of this research created their avatars in representations of their ideal selves, and not how they truly perceive themselves, this being the only denied hypothesis.

In conclusion, this paper implements itself as a novel addition to literature with a new facet of the Uses and Gratifications theory in Lebanon. Additionally, this research seeks to study whether the concepts of the Uses and Gratifications theory, such as escapism and social utility, are able to be examined in virtual reality despite their existence in the physical world. Concepts related to gender theory were also investigated throughout the research, specifically that of ego ideals, the male gaze, toxic masculinity, and gender identity. To illustrate, this paper seeks to explore whether these concepts are able to transgress the boundaries of literature and visual arts, and position themselves in the realm of virtual reality. Additional benefits of this thesis include the ability for future researchers to use this paper as a reference whenever seeking to obtain more information regarding the discussed theories within virtual reality gaming in the country of Lebanon. Most importantly, this thesis also serves as a reference for other researchers to use in fulfilling gaps in knowledge specifically related to stereotyping and discrimination. It is only through knowledge that one may find the keys to ameliorating the detrimental effects of society.

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Appendix

The measurement instrument to be used in this research are semi-structured in-depth interviews.

Interview Script:

“Hello, my name is Elias, and I am currently working on a research project at Notre Dame University - Louaize. I am interested to know some information about you regarding your experiences during your time spent on the VRChat videogame. I would be grateful if you would be willing to sit through a short and fun interview in order to help my research. Your identity will be kept completely anonymous.

Before you agree to take part in this interview here is some information you must consider.

To participate in this study is completely voluntary. The data of the interviews will be analyzed in my research and by taking part in this interview you are giving consent to participate in this research. Please note that other information I have obtained through observing you in VRChat will be compared to your responses in this interview.

Please feel free to take all the time you need to go over this, if you have any questions or worries, please discuss them with me as I am totally willing to help. Here is a card with my mobile number and email.”

Interview questions to be asked include:

- How did you come across VRChat?
- What is your main drive to play VRChat?
- How many in-game hours do you have?
- Have you made any friends in VRChat, how? (Social Utility)
- How has VRChat helped build your character and social skills? (Social Utility)
- Is it easier to make new friends in real life or in VRChat, and why? (Social Utility)

- What techniques have you learned by observing others in the realm of VRChat? (Vicarious experience)
- What avatars do you usually select to play with, what do they look like?
- Why did you choose these avatars?
- Have you ever played as a female avatar? (If yes why?) (Male Gaze)
- What is the first unfiltered thought that comes to mind when seeing a female avatar in VRChat? (Male Gaze)
- In your experience, are female avatars usually portrayed sexually in VRChat? How does that make you feel? (Male Gaze)
- As a man, would you be okay crying in front of people? Why and why not? (Toxic Masculinity)
- As a man, do you feel that it is okay to cry in VRChat, why or why not? (Toxic Masculinity)
- Have you had any verbal altercations with women in VRChat? How did you interact them, and what were some of the exchanged words in discussion? (Toxic Masculinity)
- What do you think composes your masculinity (if male) femininity (if female)? (Gender Identity)
- Are you more comfortable expressing your masculinity/femininity in real life, or VRChat, and why? (Gender Identity)
- Is the avatar that you use in VRChat a representation of your own masculinity/femininity? Why or Why not? (Gender Identity)
- What do you think someone would say if they had to compare your avatar to your real self?
- In your own opinion, does your avatar represent a better version of yourself? (If yes) In what ways is your avatar superior to yourself in real life? (Ego Ideals)
- Do you have fun playing VRChat? Does it help you relieve stress?
- What problems in your daily life lead you to deviate into the realm of VRChat? (Diversion)

- Do you feel like you have any repressed emotions, what are they and why? (Catharsis)
- In what ways do you release these kinds of pent-up emotions in VRChat? (Catharsis)
- Why did you decide to play a virtual reality game?
- Do you tend to withdraw from reality through VRChat more often than other outlets? Why or Why not? (Escapism)

Participant Observation

Regarding participant observation, I as the researcher will be focusing on a few specific elements.

These elements include:

- Comparing how participants behave with female avatars.
- Comparing how participants behave with female avatars in comparison to how they mentioned during the interviews.
- Observing the level of happiness or excitement the participant displayed in VRChat compared to their real-life personalities.
- Observing the behavior of participants in VRChat in order to check the level of honesty of the answers provided during the interview.
- Observation of participants' social behavior.