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Navigating identity in digital spaces: An exploratory study of social engagement and interactions

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Through a focus group approach in an exploratory qualitative study, we aim to understand how engagement on digital platforms varies by social identities including race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and religion, and the respondents' response to both positive and negative interactions.
Methods: This study involved data collection from six focus groups, two included members of the general population, two focused on the experiences of People of Color (POC), one that included women gamers, and one for all gamers. Participants were asked various questions to aid in the research team's understanding of participants' perceptions of their online experiences with topics including platform engagement, positive and negative online experiences, social connections, identity-based perceptions online (e.g., race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and religion), and online protection.
Results: The results show that the majority of Black and LGBQ participants report experiencing identity-related discrimination online. Women were more likely to report feeling unsafe while on gaming platforms and more frequently used security measures to conceal their voice, identity, and background to reduce discriminatory experiences. Many study participants reported using social media and gaming platforms to build connections, feel a sense of community, and engage in diverse relationships.
Conclusion: This study's findings provide insight into the potential of social media and gaming platforms in promoting self-expression, social connectedness, and a strong sense of community. However, our results also demonstrate the ways in which many digital spaces foster discrimination, harassment, fetishization, and exclusion – all of which can exacerbate negative health outcomes among marginalized individuals.

1. Introduction

1.1. The growing influence of online engagement on health outcomes

Online engagement has become a critical aspect of daily life, intertwined with various social determinants of health to shape health outcomes (Tao & Fisher, 2022; Vogel et al., 2024). According to Perrin and Atske (2021), 85 % of Americans go online daily, with 31 % reporting

almost constant internet use. This pervasive activity, particularly on social media, significantly influences social interactions (Caplan & High, 2007; Utz & Breuer, 2017) and has important implications for health outcomes, behavior change, and health equity (Bessière et al., 2010; Korda & Itani, 2013). Identities such as race, gender, and sexual orientation are crucial for understanding the health effects of online interactions, as these experiences often reflect broader social inequalities. For individuals who experience discrimination based on their racial,

gender, or sexual orientation identities, digital spaces offer both community support and exposure to discrimination or exclusion (Stevens et al., 2017; Velasquez & Montgomery, 2020), resulting in complex dynamics that warrant further investigation. This paper explores how online engagement interacts with social determinants of health for marginalized communities.

1.2. The role of online platforms in fostering community and informational support

Online platforms have the potential to foster social connections and create a sense of community, belonging, and self-expression. Social media offers users visibility and association, allowing them to unite around shared experiences and identities (Ellison & Vitak, 2015) while engaging with others across their social networks (Spears & Postmes, 2015). Posts by racially marginalized users convey a sense of group belonging, color consciousness, and identification with groups historically stigmatized by the dominant society (Grasmuck et al., 2009). Black women on social media also describe how they cultivate healing and joy through various methods online, despite the harmful effects of unwanted behavior online (Musgrave et al., 2022). For Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Queer (LGBQ) individuals, in particular, digital spaces offer the opportunity to safely explore and express their identities in ways that may be constrained offline, supporting mental well-being through validation and inclusion (Bates et al., 2020). Platform characteristics including heterogeneity, interactivity, and a sense of belonging also contribute to user satisfaction and enhance users' efficacy in enacting positive change through civic engagement or electronic word of mouth (Pang & Ruan, 2024; Pang & Yang, 2024; Pang & Zhang, 2024a). These elements of online engagement show how digital spaces can act as buffers against injustice and social exclusion as well as contribute to health resilience, especially for marginalized populations.

Moreover, online platforms serve as important venues where people can receive and provide informational support content (Chen & Wang, 2021). People use social media to exchange advice, share experiences, and access professional information that may be otherwise hard to find (Oh & Syn, 2015; Westerman et al., 2014). Studies show that digital platforms can help bridge the gap in access to information and support for marginalized populations, including communities of color (Vassilakopoulou & Hustad, 2023). Additionally, social media platforms have been found to assist women in gaining digital skills, developing their businesses, and overcoming the challenges of digitalization (Olsson & Bernhard, 2021). The informational support online is particularly beneficial for communities like LGBQ individuals, who often turn to digital spaces for information on sensitive health topics, mental health resources, and identity exploration (Fox & Ralston, 2016). For those with limited access to resources or facing social stigma, online platforms may provide crucial informational support that can enhance decision-making, social connection, and overall well-being.

1.3. Negative impacts of online engagement for marginalized groups

Online environments also pose significant risks for marginalized groups, including forms of discrimination, harassment, and exclusion, which exacerbate social and health inequalities. Research shows that online platforms can amplify harmful stereotypes and facilitate the spread of hate speech, targeting individuals based on their race, gender, sexual orientation, or religion (Castaño-Pulgarín et al., 2021). People of Color (POC), for instance, report significantly higher rates of cyberbullying and online threats than their White counterparts (Lenhart et al., 2016), which perpetuate systemic racial inequalities. Women, particularly those active in public or political discourse, are often targets of gendered harassment, including threats of violence, sexual objectification, and demeaning comments (Burke Winkelman et al., 2015; Ligman et al., 2024). For LGBQ users, while some platforms provide support, others may expose them to potential harassment, online hate, and

employment discrimination contributing to feelings of alienation and anxiety (Birnholtz et al., 2014; Keighley, 2022). Sensitive disclosure heightens the risk of harassment and stigmatization for LGBQ individuals, which is compounded by the contribution of self-disclosure to perceived informational and social overload (Pang, 2024; Pinch et al., 2024).

Discrimination may exacerbate pre-existing limitations of social media and gaming platforms to improve life satisfaction (Lin & Zhou, 2025; Pang & Zhang, 2024b). Hedonic benefits motivate smartphone use, but the failure of digital spaces to fulfill persisting psychological needs creates cyclical dependence on digital apps, especially in cases of problematic app use (Lin & Zhou, 2025; Pang, 2024). These negative experiences, rooted in broader social determinants of health, have implications for the mental health and overall well-being of marginalized individuals, as the emotional toll of discrimination and exclusion can lead to heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and stress (Turner, 2013).

1.4. Gaps in the literature

Existing literature has notable gaps in understanding identity-related experiences in social interaction and online communities (Tao & Fisher, 2022; Zeligman et al., 2022). Factors such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and other identities are crucial for interpreting online engagement. However, much of the existing research on social media use remains focused on mainstream populations, often neglecting the unique experiences of marginalized groups (e.g., (Berryman et al., 2018; Bessière et al., 2010; Yoon et al., 2020). Moreover, research on social media often relies heavily on quantitative methods, using large-scale surveys or metrics like time spent online or social media frequency (Tao & Fisher, 2022; Vogel et al., 2024). While these approaches help reveal broad trends, they often miss the more nuanced experiences of marginalized individuals in digital spaces.

1.5. Study aims

This study is grounded in the concept of networked publics, which position digital platforms as dynamic spaces where social interaction, identity expression, and visibility are shaped by technological affordances (boyd, 2010). These digital spaces not only enable engagement but also mediate power, access, and voice in ways that reflect and reproduce offline inequalities. To better understand how identity shapes online experiences, we also draw on intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), which recognize that experiences of marginalization are not singular but emerge through overlapping structures of race, gender, sexuality, and religion. These frameworks guided both our research questions and analysis, helping us explore how individuals from minoritized groups navigate digital platforms and respond to both inclusion and harm. By combining insights from digital media theory and a social justice framework, the study aims to capture the complex, identity-mediated nature of digital engagement.

This study explores the impact of online experiences of POC, women, and other minoritized and non-minoritized groups to address key gaps in current research. Through a focus group approach in an exploratory qualitative study, we aim to understand how engagement on digital platforms varies by social identities including race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and religion, and the respondents' response to both positive and negative interactions. The specific research questions are as follows: 1) How do individuals with varied social identities (i.e., race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and religion) experience engagement on digital platforms? 2) In what ways do these individuals respond to both positive and negative interactions online?

2. Methods

2.1. Recruitment and participants

For this study, we recruited 51 study participants through advertising on social media (i.e., Facebook and Twitter) and outreach via community organizations. We conducted 6 focus groups, with shared eligibility criteria that included residing in the United States, English proficiency, identifying as 18 years of age or older, having access to the Internet or a smartphone, and using at least one online application (e.g., social media platforms, informational sites, gaming platforms, discussion platforms) on a weekly basis. Two of the focus groups were open to anyone who met the study criteria (General FG) (with 14 and 10 participants), two focused on the experiences of People of Color (POC FG) (with 9 and 5 participants), one included women, some of whom were gamers (Women FG) (4 participants), and one was dedicated exclusively to gamers of any gender identity (Gaming FG with "gamer" defined by a person playing with or against other player in a digital space) (9 participants). This structure allowed us to capture a broad range of perspectives. It also enabled a deeper exploration of how specific identities such as race and ethnicity, gender, and online subcultural affiliation influence digital engagement, which aligned with the study's intersectional framework. Interested individuals were asked to complete a brief online survey to determine their eligibility for a specific focus group.

This study was approved by the University of California, San Francisco Institutional Review Board (IRB #18–24593) on 7/14/2020, which was the senior author's institution at the time of the study. The IRB granted a waiver of signed consent and approved the use of recorded verbal informed consent. Participants received the consent form via email prior to the focus group, and the moderator reviewed it at the start of the session, addressed any questions, and recorded each participant's verbal agreement to participate. The focus group moderators conducted 90-min focus groups via Zoom in September and October 2022. Participants completed brief demographic forms after the focus groups and received a $50 Amazon or Target gift card.

2.2. Focus group guide development

A focus group guide was developed based on study aims and a literature review to better understand participants' perceptions of their unique online experiences. The initial study focused on race, ethnicity, and gender. When participants were prompted to reflect on other salient identities in digital spaces, they frequently discussed sexual orientation and religion. As a result, these identities were incorporated into this study. Because this expansion emerged organically during the focus groups, we did not collect specific demographic data on participants' sexual orientation, transgender identity, or religious affiliation.

Here are the core focus group questions:

● *What are some of your positive online experiences?*
● *What are some of your negative online experiences?*
● *How would you describe your social interactions with other people online?*
● *We are going to talk about your online experiences based on your race and ethnicity. How do you think your race or ethnicity plays a role in your engagement online? Can you give us some examples whether you think it does or does not? [This question was also asked by gender and any other identity that the participant wanted to discuss.]*
● *What are some steps you have taken to protect yourself or somebody else from the impact of negative online experiences?*

Face validity was carefully considered in the development of both the focus group questions and the codebook. To ensure high face validity, the questions were designed to be relevant to the research objectives and meaningful to participants (Allen et al., 2023). Although face validity is subjective, it is closely tied to increased participant engagement. To enhance this, we provided a transparent explanation of the study's purpose to participants, and the questions underwent iterative refinement with expert collaborators. Additionally, probes were included to clarify question meaning, and the open-ended format allowed participants to guide the discussion based on their own experiences.

2.3. Data collection & analysis

The two moderators, a Black woman and an Asian man, were trained to create an inclusive environment. Training focused on fostering open dialogue, respecting diverse viewpoints, and ensuring that all participants felt heard. This approach aimed to minimize biases, build trust, and support the study's intersectional framework. The moderators utilized the same guide for discussion. Each group was facilitated by one moderator, with both moderators leading the general and POC focus groups, while the female moderator conducted the all-women focus group. Each session was recorded via Zoom, and the audio was sent to rev.com for transcription. Transcripts were uploaded into NVivo for data management. Each was reviewed and coded by at least two members of the research team. Our preliminary codebook was based on our study aims and previous literature, and it included the categories of platform engagement, positive and negative online experiences, social connections, identity-based perceptions online (by race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and other identities), and online protection.

The study team employed reflexive thematic analysis, following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021), to analyze focus group transcripts. This method emphasizes researcher subjectivity, reflexivity, and the co-construction of meaning, rather than seeking coding reliability through inter-rater agreement. Initial codes were developed deductively from the focus group guide and refined inductively through close readings of transcripts by the research team.

Themes were generated inductively within each code by identifying repeated patterns, contrasts, and meaningful insights in participants' narratives. The team met regularly to discuss coding decisions, resolve differences through discussion, and collaboratively refine the thematic structure. This approach allowed for the emergence of rich, contextual themes that reflected the complexities of participants' digital experiences. The analysis team was intentionally diverse in terms of race, gender, geographic region, age, and social media use, enhancing the trustworthiness and depth of the interpretive process.

3. Results

3.1. Participants

Fifty-one individuals were sampled across the United States (see Table 1). The majority of participants were 18–34 years old and highly educated with 73 % having obtained a Bachelor's degree. The sample included 39 Black participants (76 %), 7 White participants (14 %), 2 Asian participants (4 %), and 3 participants who identified as "Other" (6 %). Twenty-one study participants identified as female (41 %), 30 identified as male (59 %), and all were highly engaged in social media platforms. Numerous participants reported spending 8–14 h online per week (29 %), including social media and gaming platforms, while others reported 35 h or more online per week (27 %). The majority of participants spent a reported 1–14 h on gaming platforms each week, with a substantial number spending 15 h per week or greater than 28 h per week on gaming platforms.

Most of the Black participants reported being discriminated against online, but some student participants denied experiencing discrimination. Women reported feeling more unsafe online, particularly on gaming platforms, and having taken gender-specific security measures including concealing their voice, identity, and background. Members of the LGBQ community also reported targeted discrimination. The theme sections are as follows: Connectedness, Identity-Related Experiences by Race: Varying Levels of Discrimination, Identity-Related Experiences by

Table 1

Demographic Information for Focus Group Participants (n = 51).

Categories	% (n)
Age[a]	
18–24 years	46 (n = 23)
25–34 years	52 (n = 26)
35–44 years	2 (n = 1)
Region of Residence[a]	
Northeast	42 (n = 21)
West	26 (n = 13)
South	30 (n = 15)
Pacific	2 (n = 1)
Education	
Less than high school degree	0 (n = 0)
High school degree or equivalent	4 (n = 2)
Some college	16 (n = 8)
Bachelor's degree	73 (n = 37)
Graduate degree	8 (n = 4)
Race	
American Indian or Alaskan Native	0 (n = 0)
Asian	4 (n = 2)
Black or African American	76 (n = 39)
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific	0 (n = 0)
Islander	
White	14 (n = 7)
Other	6 (n = 3)
Gender	
Female	41 (n = 21)
Male	59 (n = 30)
Other	0 (n = 0)
Work Status	
Employed	75 (n = 38)
Full-Time Student	16 (n = 8)
Unemployed	10 (n = 5)
Average Hours Online Per Week	
Less Than 1 Hour	0 (n = 0)
1–7 Hours	6 (n = 3)
8–14 Hours	29 (n = 15)
15–21 Hours	12 (n = 6)
22–28 Hours	16 (n = 8)
29–35 Hours	10 (n = 5)
>35 Hours	27 (n = 14)
Average Hours on social media per week	
Less Than 1 Hour	0 (n = 0)
1–7 Hours	25 (n = 13)
8–14 Hours	20 (n = 10)
15–21 Hours	16 (n = 8)
22–28 Hours	25 (n = 13)
>28 Hours	14 (n = 7)
Average Hours on Gaming Platforms Per Week	
Less Than 1 Hour	9 (n = 5)
1–7 Hours	27 (n = 14)
8–14 Hours	24 (n = 12)
15–21 Hours	12 (n = 6)
22–28 Hours	16 (n = 8)
>28 Hours	12 (n = 6)

Note: N = 51.

[a] n = 50 for age and region residence.

Gender: Safety Practices, Identity-Related Experiences by Religion: Online Conflict, Identity-Related Experiences by Sexual Orientation: Discrimination vs. Equality, and Identity-Related Experiences by Other Identities: Accent, Education, Region.

3.2. Connectedness

Social media affords its participants connections in their personal relationships, vocation, and community. Not only did participants report using social media to message friends and family, but some were also using online platforms to form new friendships and mentorships. One participant said, "That's the good thing about gaming is I have friends who are 15 years older than me, and I have friends who are 20 that I serve as a mentor towards" (Women FG). Participants mentioned that social media reduces barriers to forming and maintaining relationships, including geography and socioeconomic status. One participant said, "I want to say social interactions … meeting new people from outside your vicinity or sociality" (General FG), while another cites social media as "a means where it bridge[s] the gap between maybe the poor and the rich" (General FG). In terms of socioeconomic barriers, some participants advertised their businesses, found job opportunities through LinkedIn, and supplemented their income through streaming online gaming.

Participants sought out like-minded people and formed communities based on shared interests or identities such as being a plus-sized woman or a female gamer. A female gamer specifically referred to her all-female gaming community as "a weird sorority" (Women FG). Finding common ground with other participants was a source of social support. More frequently, however, participants cited new exposures and diverse perspectives as sources of satisfaction online and that they enjoyed broadening their worldview. A participant stated, "[X (formerly Twitter) is] a very universal handle [through] which you get to meet all people from all walks of life" (General FG). Since social media provides spaces to both share and consume content, participants can access new information in the form of updates, general knowledge, tutorials, and participation in online studies.

3.3. Identity-related experiences overview

While social media is a point of exposure to different walks of life, it is not always a source of unity. Participants were acutely aware of how their identities altered their online experiences and made them vulnerable to identity-based threats and attacks. Race, gender, religion, and sexual orientation had particularly profound effects on the way participants interacted online.

3.4. Identity-related experiences by race: Varying Levels of Discrimination

Some POC participants experienced hostility online or a lack of acceptance when they met their online friends in person. One participant reported, "I'm Black and I'm online … So, when we meet in person, some of our friends, the character and attitude actually change" (All Gamers FG) and another participant said, "But a lot of my [online] friends when I meet them, they don't accept me for where I am, because of my color" (POC FG). Among participants in the focus group, the sense of an "in-group" and "out-group" was prominent. Between racial groups, a participant said, "when you get online, especially places like Twitter and Facebook, you discover that a White [person] doesn't really want to accept [a] request with a Black [person]" (General FG), and another states, "while I was on social media, I found a friend who was White, but because I'm a Black, he said he wasn't interested" (General FG).

Within racial groups, social media participants exhibit racial homophily. A focus group participant said, "I think that talking to Black people more, it brings more confidence than talking to the White because it really matters" (All Gamers FG) and another stated, "I'm a Black person, so I tend to interact with more of my race" (All Gamers FG). In the focus groups, subcultural homophily also surfaced. Within the gaming community, participants navigated racial discrimination specific to gaming platforms. A participant who identified as a gamer reported that racial slurs were also common on gaming platforms.

Within games themselves, functions that enable players to customize an avatar demonstrate colorism in gaming. A player stated, "People would rather be blue, I feel like, than any kind of in between brown" (Women FG). She stated, "[People of Color] don't receive as much, as many views as another creator who may be a White girl or White guy. And some of the time those creators, they kind of take the ideas from non-White creators and they use that and they get more views, more impressions from not just people but even companies and brands" (Women FG). Therefore, appropriation presents another challenge for POC online.

Racism online was particularly disheartening for some participants

because they viewed it as a missed opportunity to promote equality. One participant stated:

> "And we no longer practice humanity. We are more concerned about our cultures or religion. And we bring that out on social media platforms, which was meant to connect us individually. I think the essence of social media was to break the barrier of ethnicity, culture, race, and all of that. But I think we're not doing a good job with that because we have brought it there" (General FG).

However, some participants noted the irrelevance of race and absence of discrimination. With regard to race, participants stated, "So when I first moved here I went to a very diverse school. So most of my friends are from different backgrounds like me. So when I added them in my social media it didn't really matter much" (Women FG) and another stated, "So the fact that I'm Black, I've not really seen it as an issue moving around social media" (General FG). Another participant said:

> "So in social media, I believe the main thing people listen to is the voice and most times not the person behind the voice, sometimes. Whether you're Black, irrespective of your ethnicity wherever you're from, if you have something reasonable to say, if you have this voice and you're giving the people what they want, I think they'll listen because I've done that a couple of times" (General FG).

3.5. Identity-related experiences by gender: Safety Practices

Women participants were aware of many ways their gender identity influenced their experiences online. Offline social structures and gender expectations transferred to online environments, as one participant noted, "For me, you can say the media uses some stereotypes to get consumers and give out misleading messages regarding their sexual identity, which can influence children" (General FG). Focus group participants cited beauty standards as a damaging expectation when male participants body-shame women online. One woman said, "Just in general, if you see a plus size model, the man is the one who will go and say like, 'Hey why don't you exercise?' They think it's fun and all jokes, but they don't understand that on the other side of the photo, there's a real human being and they have feelings and all those things" (Women FG). Both on social media and gaming platforms, other participants change the way they dress or express themselves for fear of offline repercussions. A participant reported:

> "I will dress completely differently because I'll be on camera, because I don't want anybody to know what I look like, where I work, any of those things. Because men don't care about male streamers, but they'll go out and find anything that they can to doxx a female streamer or to feel entitled to their information" (Women FG).

While there was a digital buffer, women were still aware of the vulnerability their bodies pose as a result of societal expectations and their increased susceptibility to harassment.

The gaming community was identified as a male-dominated space. A participant stated, "Because there were more guys than females on the space … they were like, 'A female can't ever rule'" (POC FG). Female identifying players are paradoxically the objects of both hostility and desire. Men harass women and perpetuate stereotypes on gaming platforms in an attempt to gatekeep or prevent women from entering an online space. A participant reported, "If you're performing bad in the video game, it's that competitive spirit. They'll be like, 'Oh, you must be a woman'" (Women FG). The voice chat is a place of pronounced vulnerability for women. The player recalled, "I'll talk and then be like, 'Oh wow, I didn't expect a woman to be performing so well as X, Y, Z character'" (Women FG). To avoid harassment, women mask their identities and forgo the use of a microphone, as one participant stated, "But a lot of times as being a woman, I can't even come on the mic without getting derogatory slurs, made fun of. They don't know what I

look like, but they'll be like, 'Oh, I bet you're like a gamer girl, fat b*tch. You're sweaty, acne'" (Women FG). Within games themselves, players are concerned by the lack of women main characters and one could not recall a single first-person shooter game with a women lead.

Ironically, however, women are viewed as objects of desire and some men pose as women on gaming platforms to gain an advantage. A participant said, "They'll pose as women completely and utterly in personality and mannerism and everything in order to also get in-game items. And that's what simping comes from, is this idea that she's a woman, so I got to help her because I know more than her"(Women FG) and another stated, "And a lot of men will play women, and I just think that's so interesting that they're ready and willing to verbally attack women, but yet they play a female character because I think there's something about the male gaze" (Women FG). While misrepresentation of one's gender is a commonly reported transgression on gaming platforms, participants who are women recognize men as perpetrators in a more general sense. A woman said, "Most of the time it is always men or guys. I haven't received anything negative from a girl gamer from as far as I know if she's a girl. So sexist and racist remarks, whether it's directed towards me or just in general" (Women FG). However, some women can capitalize off men's hegemonic view of women. A participant mentioned, "I really think that [streaming is] an avenue for a lot of girls and they make a lot of money doing it. And they don't necessarily have to be a hot tub streamer or whatever, sexual empowerment" (Women FG).

In response to gender discrimination, women exhibit gender homophily. A woman said, "For me, when I'm on social media, I think I'm more likely to engage with people of the same gender as me. For me, I think just because it's easier in a way because I know they'll be nicer" (Women FG). There was a marked contrast between the way women reported gender homophily and how their male counterparts perceived their agglutination. Some men in the focus groups perceived female privilege on social media. A man stated, "I feel the female [sex] is treated specially online than the male gender. Just with one hashtag their counterpart will take up the case. I feel they have more voice online compared to the male [sex]" (General FG) and another contributed, "And they use that voice and people listen to them and they use it to promote whatever they want a do … social media has actually created this opportunity and try to better give females a voice compared to the male" (General FG). Several men denied the existence of gender discrimination online.

3.6. Identity-related experiences by religion: Online Conflict

Participants indicated that direct conflict resulted from religious identities online, as one user stated, "Religion has impacted my online experience because there are people out there that discriminate when it comes to religion, which isn't supposed to be okay" (All Gamers FG). Another participant drew attention to the contention between their sexual orientation and other users' religious identities in the statement, "You can't come online and start backlashing on people because we believe that it's not a part of your religion to … So as a gay person, you know that it's not every society that accepts gay worldwide" (POC FG). In terms of sensitivity, a participant reported unintentionally offending someone based on their religious beliefs, "I actually commented on a religious post, and I tried correcting the person that actually made the post. And after I was warned and so much stress was made on me, someone actually inboxed me, actually sent me a message by DM while chatting with me, the person actually mentioned my home address, and even dropped my cell number" (General FG). In response to interreligious conflict, users began displaying religious homophily. Users stated, "another experience I've had is a little discrimination in the Fortnite and the Call of Duty when the Muslims create group or a clan, and as far as a Christian, you're not allowed in the clan" (All Gamers FG) and "A lot of people, they don't want to speak to people who's not from their religion … They brought in the concepts of religion by talking to people from

their same religion" (All Gamers FG).

Religious beliefs can influence online behaviors. Participants identified expectations and sensitivity resulting from their ideology. One user commented, "It's part of a Christendom religion, you can't come out and be criticizing people, Oh, this person is a gay. Oh, this person is committing abortion. Oh, this person is a slut, is call girl'" (POC FG) and another stated, "I think my religion is not really impacted a lot by this thing because I have my morals when it comes to things I do online. For instance, maybe I try and talk to a young lady online, maybe she's trying to sex chat me, I definitely block that because I have my standards, the way I do my things, I have my principles" (General FG).

3.7. Identity-related experiences by sexual orientation: discrimination vs. equality

Members of the LGBQ community face online discrimination because of their sexual orientation. A participant reported, "I choose to belong to any sexual orientation, but people kind of see the hurt, just pick it to hurt me just for being who I am, just for being me, so that is it" (POC FG). LGBQ people also contend with fetishization online, as stated by a participant, "So I identify as a bisexual woman. But in the gaming community, that's fetishized … I'm rolling my eyes" (Women FG). Participants reported that they avoided disclosing their sexual orientation to deter harassment and fetishization.

However, while people experience discrimination based on their sexual orientation, social media is also a source of empowerment and a means to promote equality and inclusion. A participant recalled,

"social media helped with coming out with my sexuality … People share their experiences of how they told their families about themself and how they were accepted without being discriminated against or being looked down on. It gave me the courage and hope to come out about who I am to people" (POC FG).

Others also championed equality between people of different sexual orientations, such as a participant who stated, "I have two friends that actually didn't see it nice to have a gay or a lesbian as a friend. But for me I see that everyone's created by God. So you've got to treat everyone equally, I accept everyone" (POC FG) and another who said, "Yeah, it doesn't matter because … this one is transgender or queer or bisexual, or lesbian or gay, you choose to treat them differently because it's love, everyone is made the same, created the same" (General FG).

3.8. Identity-related experiences by other identities: accent, education, region

Participants reported other aspects of their identity influence their online experiences, including country, educational level, socioeconomic status, and language or accent. Reports included, "Once they just ask, 'Okay, where are you gaming from?' I just mentioned your location, your country, they'll be like, 'No, no. Wow. No, we don't communicate with people like you,'" (POC FG) and "So sometimes, I make a lot of mistakes in my comments or my posts and a lot of people pick it up for me, trying to use that against me. They mock me, use abusive words against me and try to mock my educational background, something like that" (POC FG).

Language and accent often intersect with race and ethnicity, as highlighted in the statements, "If you talk normally, air quotes, nobody's going to come after you for that. But if you have a deep southern accent or New England, or even from somewhere else in the world, somebody's going to say something about it" (Women FG) and "I know that people who have accents or speaking Ebonics, for example, or even in another language, there are people who are Korean who play these games, or there's a large Spanish speaking population, they usually get called derogatory things" (Women FG).

4. Discussion

The majority of study participants spent substantial amounts of time online with 29 % of participants spending 8–14 h online per week and 27 % reported 35 h or more online per week. Most Black and LGBQ individuals reported experiencing targeted discrimination online, while women reported feeling more unsafe, especially when using gaming platforms, and engaging in security measures to conceal their voice, identity, and background to reduce exposure to discrimination. Most study participants reported using social media and gaming platforms to build connections, feel a sense of community, and engage in unique relationships that were not limited by geographic or socioeconomic barriers. Many participants sought out like-minded communities with shared interests while others reported that they appreciated being exposed to new perspectives online.

4.1. Identity-related experiences and coping mechanisms

Identity-related experiences linked to one's race, gender, religion, and sexual orientation had profound effects on the way study participants interacted with others online. Individuals of color reported frequent experiences of racial discrimination, general hostility, and racial homophily, a tendency for people to form relationships with others of the same racial group, online. Participants who engaged in gaming reported platform-specific racial discrimination in the form of racial slurs, colorism, and limited character customization options online. Women study participants who engaged in gaming also engaged in gender homophily and noted a lack of female character customization and representation online. Many women study participants reported masking their identity by silencing their microphones, changing the way they spoke, altering their clothing when on camera, and minimizing their self-expression to avoid gender-based discrimination online. They also reported that gaming platforms were dominated by men whereas women gamers often receive unwanted sexual attention and hostility based on their gender expression. However, some women participants denied the existence of gender discrimination and reported "female privilege" in male-dominated spaces online. Similar to the women in gender-based focus groups, LGBQ individuals reported frequent fetishization, harassment, and discrimination from others which led them to conceal their sexual orientation online. Others noted that few platforms served as a source of empowerment by promoting inclusivity among other LGBQ individuals. Some study participants reported engaging in religious homophily to combat feeling excluded online based on their religious beliefs. For example, several participants in this study reported experiencing exclusion when disclosing their Muslim identity when engaging with Christians online. Finally, study participants reported that education level, socioeconomic status, language, and accent influenced their unique online experiences.

There is growing research on discrimination and identity-related experiences online. In this study, many study participants have reported masking, unintentional anonymity, and homophily as coping mechanisms to combat discrimination online. This is consistent with prior literature finding individuals of color, women, and LGBQ individuals will mask their identity to reduce harassment, fetishization, and unwanted attention from others online (Erickson et al., 2022; Hoskin, 2023; Kuss et al., 2022; Souza et al., 2021). Another documented coping strategy includes homophily, the tendency for people to seek out others who are similar to themselves. Homophily has been documented as both a protective mechanism against exclusion and discrimination online (Fazelpour & Rubin, 2022; Golik & Blanco, 2022). For example, some study participants joined online communities because they offered resources for reporting and server moderation.

Also, some participants reported feeling more confident when interacting with others where the majority of platform users shared their identity characteristics. In contrast, some study participants of color reported that social media did not impact their unique online

experiences. This discrepancy may be due to a combination of individual attitudes, perceived privilege, and unintentional anonymity exhibited by study participants. Anonymity allows marginalized individuals to avoid harassment and other discriminatory behaviors online but it also limits their ability to express themselves freely. Previous studies have noted that anonymity online contributes to the promotion of extreme opinions and beliefs online (Hiaeshutter-Rice & Hawkins, 2022). Several study participants of color noted that they were excluded from predominantly White spaces online, which reinforced their previous experiences of harassment and hostility. Unfortunately, the impact of unintentional anonymity is not well documented, and further research is needed.

4.2. Social media, health equity, and social connectedness

In this study, many study participants viewed social media as an underutilized tool to promote health equity by encouraging users to focus on shared life experiences. While previous studies noted the role of shared values as a motivator for social media engagement (Dale et al., 2020; Nikolinakou & Phua, 2020), the role of shared life experiences and dialogue in promoting equality online is understudied and warrants further investigation. Another theme documented across the literature includes bystander intervention. The participants did not report meaningful impacts of bystander intervention on changing community norms, particularly in the gaming community. Bystander intervention moves beyond victim-perpetrator relationships by including a third party who aims to prevent discrimination and violence through digital activism (Fairbairn, 2020). Ultimately, research is required to better understand the role of digital activism and its impact on mental health outcomes among individuals who experience identity-based discrimination online.

Another documented theme across the literature includes the role of social connectedness, advertising, and networking among authors who examine the impact of identity-related experiences online. Social media and gaming platforms can serve as access points to diverse communities, cultures, and perspectives (Levy et al., 2021; Sipley, 2024; Stein et al., 2023). In this study, many focus group participants reported positive experiences linked to diverse exposures across the internet while others exhibited homophily to reduce potential identity-based threats. For example, many women gamers create networks that act as a protective mechanism against gender-based discrimination, harassment, and fetishization (Guajardo, 2022; Zorlu & Özkan, 2020). Similar to previous studies (Chen & Wang, 2021; Rosen et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2021), participants in this study reported social media communities as sources of social support. Finally, this study supports previous findings that social media serves as a useful tool for advertising and networking (Davis et al., 2020; Infante & Mardikaningsih, 2022). Social media may reduce geographic barriers and promote economic mobility as some participants reported readily accessing online platforms for career opportunities.

Much of the existing research on social media use and health remains focused on non-marginalized populations which neglects the unique experiences of marginalized groups (Berryman et al., 2018; Bessière et al., 2010; Yoon et al., 2020). Finally, existing research on the health impacts of social media predominantly relies on quantitative methods, using large-scale surveys (Chen & Wang, 2021). While these approaches help reveal broad trends, they often miss the more nuanced ways online experiences shape the health of marginalized individuals. The current study adds to this limited space.

4.3. Strengths and limitations

Strengths of this qualitative study include study participant demographics, documentation of unique online experiences among marginalized individuals, and the implementation of qualitative methods to capture more in-depth personal experiences of individuals who experience discrimination online. There are few studies examining

the unique online experiences of minoritized communities. This study also promotes consensus-building among authors ranging from diverse racial, cultural, and geographic backgrounds. Limitations include unequal representation of identities across our study sample and generalizability of study findings to other populations documented across the literature. Our study sample (n = 51) was primarily made up of participants who identified as 18–34 years of age (n = 49), Black (n = 39), and educated (Bachelor's degree or higher, n = 37). Previous studies have noted similar study population characteristics with young and highly educated individuals making up the majority of internet users (Hruska & Maresova, 2020).

Since the focus groups relied upon a convenience sample of participants, potential biases must be noted. Primarily, there may be the presence of self-selection bias, where volunteers with more extreme viewpoints or invested interests in the topics of discussion are overrepresented. This inherent polarization must be considered when generalizing the findings to broader demographic populations. Other potential confounding biases include social desirability bias and groupthink. Moderators and participants were not aware of each other's identities outside of what was voluntarily shared during the sessions, contributing to a partially blinded dynamic that helped reduce the influence of social desirability and other interpersonal biases (Bergelson et al., 2022).

While potential biases were present, this study aimed to mitigate biases through various measures. First, purposive, stratified sampling was employed to ensure that the focus group sample accurately reflects diverse demographic populations, revealing nuanced contextual insights regarding the topics of interest. Previous literature studies have established empirically validated interview principles to reduce biases and enhance diversity (Bergelson et al., 2022). Following these principles, the focus group interview protocols were structured with trained moderators to promote a transparent, confidential environment where participants could freely share their perspectives. The use of a structured focus group guide and consistent facilitation helped minimize moderator bias, following best practices (Bergelson et al., 2022; Bohnet, 2016). Therefore, this study had notable strengths and limitations that must be taken into consideration.

4.4. Conclusion

Social media and gaming platforms have the potential to promote individualized self-expression, social connectedness, and a strong sense of community. However, many digital spaces foster discrimination, harassment, fetishization, and exclusion which can exacerbate negative health outcomes among marginalized individuals. This qualitative study examines the impact of online experiences of focus groups to better understand how online engagement impacts social connectedness and other outcomes among individuals who experience discrimination. Social media users and gamers both report positive and negative experiences linked to social media use and gaming. These experiences are often compounded by unique identity-related experiences linked to race, gender, and sexual orientation. Another critical area of future research includes the impact of intersectionality and experiences of discrimination on physical and mental health outcomes which has received little attention across the literature. Overall, this body of literature requires further attention from researchers to inform policy and practice to reduce identity-based discrimination online and subsequent physical and mental health outcomes.

The findings also offer several practical implications. Digital platforms, particularly social media and gaming environments, could implement stronger anti-discrimination policies and moderation tools to address identity-based harassment in real-time. Additionally, platforms could collaborate with mental health organizations to provide in-app resources and support tailored to the unique needs of these groups. Promoting the creation of safe, identity-based communities and enhancing digital literacy through user education would also help

mitigate negative experiences. However, challenges such as resource limitations and resistance to change may affect the successful implementation of these initiatives. Yet, increasing inclusive representation in digital content and design, such as culturally sensitive games, can foster a more welcoming environment.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Shaniece Criss: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Hannah Kim:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Formal analysis. **Yajie Xiong:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Formal analysis. **Elizabeth Dennard:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Formal analysis. **Dalmondeh D. Nayreau:** Writing – original draft, Formal analysis. **Vaishnavi Bharadwaj:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Erin Helsel:** Writing – original draft, Formal analysis. **Vidur Jain:** Writing – original draft, Formal analysis. **Sophia Lau:** Writing – original draft, Formal analysis. **Amrutha Alibilli:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Formal analysis. **Sarah M. Gonzales:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Formal analysis. **Thu T. Nguyen:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Ethical statement

The study protocol received approval from the University of Maryland Institutional Review Board. The focus group participants provided their consent to be part of this study.

Declaration of the use of AI

AI was not utilized for any part of the work related to the manuscript submitted.

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Declaration of competing interest

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Data availability

The data required to reproduce the above findings cannot be shared at this time due to legal and ethical reasons. IRB only provided permission to the study team to have access to the transcripts.

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