

# Contained in Crises: Youth's Experience of (Digital) Familyhood During COVID-19

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**Abstract.** During COVID-19, children confined in households experience prevalent levels of loneliness and relationship conflict. To mitigate this challenge, youth have proliferated their use of digital media and virtual worlds (MMORPGs) for socialization. To understand their experiences, I conducted a quantitative content analysis on five games of an MMORPG website that is popular with children since the pandemic. This method is coupled with non-revealing in-game screenshots of players and settings where these practices occurred. I identify these five titles as family-themed, scoring higher in markers of differentiation, connectedness, and lower on family depictions. These results aligned with the primary hypothesis, which predicted a higher frequency of differentiation and connection on the games' home pages than its family codes. A discussion of the data highlighted the symbolic nature of digital familyhood, meaning making, and opportunities for the *differentiation* of the self, per Bowen's *Family Systems Theory* (1976). Implications are explored for the increasing use of technology and the concept of digital connection. Moreover, I warn of the pitfalls in relying too much on technology to socialize, through my original concept of the *digitalized other*.

**Keywords:** youth, family, COVID-19, MMORPGs, interactionism, digitalized other

## **Contained in Crises: Youth's Experience of (Digital) Familyhood During COVID-19**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, change and conflict have become synonymous. Although violence and relationship conflict in the family is not unusual during and after crises (Bradbury-Jones & Isham, 2020), the challenges of COVID-19 present family scientists and researchers with what Lebow (2020) has called a “once in a lifetime international experiment about family life” (p. 309). In this current ‘experiment,’ research has documented widespread domestic violence (Roesch et al., 2020), though interestingly, Mazza and colleagues (2020) identified technology as a tool for its confined members to ‘cling’ onto. Proliferation in digital media use with ages 11-13 by 20% and 14-17 by 30% (Statista 2021a) has emerged behind a cross-cultural backdrop where youth are using technology to mitigate feelings of isolation and loneliness (Cauberghe et al. 2021; Liu et al. 2020). This is problematic, as youth are facing a ‘second pandemic’ (Gupta & Nebhinani, 2020) where stress and anxiety are the ‘new normal’ (Hoyt et al., 2021).

Preliminary findings of COVID-19 effects on the well-being of children are not promising (Usher et al., 2020; Phelps & Sperry, 2020). Moreover, researchers call for a better understanding of how youth are dealing with the pandemic at home, demanding solutions that are representative and long-term (Wade, Prime, & Browne, 2020; Liu et al., 2020; Imran, Zeshan, & Pervaiz, 2020). However, when studying technologies related to children in families during COVID-19, the findings have largely been clinical (Limone & Toto, 2021). Notably, Green (2020) calls for members of the public to ensure that children coming out of the pandemic are “engaged with, spoken to, and guided into the future” (p. 1). There needs to be a shift in the focus on the ‘double assault’ where the prioritization of adult-centered COVID implementations are not made at the expense of containing children inside homes where neglect and abuse occurs. Ultimately, we must begin to understand and remedy the impact of the pandemic and its forced containment on children, as these negative impacts are yet to come, but they are already worrying (Lebow, 2020; Gupta & Nebhinani, 2021).

In family research, external forces of inequality are expressed through the children and the unit, rendering the family as a place to cycle attitudes and norms that contribute to social reproduction (Fox, 2015), and ultimately becoming itself a consequence of this inequality (McLanahan & Percheski, 2008). There are several multiple accounts whereby youth bear the consequences of inequality through contributions of parents or the social environment external to the family (Cavanagh & Fomby, 2019; Cherlin & Seltzer, 2014; McLanahan & Beck, 2010; Powell et al., 2016). By applying a social justice lens, it is this paper’s intention to highlight this current challenge by focusing on the experience of youth during two obstacles of COVID-19 family homes: relationship conflict in the unit, and loneliness.

In the search for specific literature, evidence of the experience of children contained at home during COVID-19 was sparse, particularly qualitative and sociological research. In lieu of a stable research consensus, I conducted this study to understand how and why youth are going online to define their digital familyhood. I adopted a content analysis on five of the top ten most popular games of a Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) popular with young children during the pandemic. Adhering to a symbolic interactionist lens, these findings contextualize with Bowen's *Family Systems Theory* (1976) as the primary theoretical anchor, offering a sociological explanation of how and why youth are dealing with relationship conflicts in the household, and loneliness. Lastly, I suggest some real world implications on the use of virtual worlds to mitigate and determine the well-being of a player's family. Further discussion centers on the long-term effects of the pandemic on how individuals may move to socialize digitally. The warnings of this endeavour are discussed with my original concept of the *digitalized other* (Srirachanikorn, 2021).

## Literature Review

### Inequalities and Intimate Partner Violence

Research shows that home isolation puts pressure on the family structure and how members interact with each other in light of COVID-19 regulation (Mazza et al., 2020). In the United States, the pandemic's effects on the economy have left low-income and racialized women with the primary burden of childcare and little prospects for employment (Yavorsky, Qian, & Sargent, 2021). Prior to the pandemic, Fox (2015) presented a 'care crisis' where Canadian employers were miserly with maternal leave while day-care facilities are exclusive to mothers with stable employment. Family research has long associated the education of parents with experiences of inequality, given that such pursuits take up social resources and thus are reflective of the parent's ability to financially provide for the child (Powell et al., 2016; Ellwood & Jencks, 2004). Contemporarily, this sentiment reflects the families under the COVID-19 lockdown, echoing McLanahan and Jacobsen's (2014) observation that the family structure is a consequence of socioeconomic inequality.

For example, a mother's confinements at home during COVID-19 are tense. Qian and Fuller (2020) argue that Canadian mothers of school-aged children are hit the hardest compared to other single and two-person parents, by economic inequalities, citing their self-report of overwhelming childcare responsibilities and less productivity. This sentiment is found cross-culturally in Kowal and colleagues' (2020) study of 26 countries during the pandemic, where mothers' level of stress is positively associated with the number of children per household. Moreover, Hamadani and colleagues (2020) translated a worse experience for low-income and middle-income Bengali families, highlighting a

sharp decline in median family income, lowering food security, mental well-being, and ultimately, intimate partner violence against Bengali mothers. Beyond the scope of this paper, it is noteworthy that mothers are not the only demographic who are experiencing stress under confinement (see Warburton & Raniolo, 2020; Arenas-Arroyo, Fernandez-Kranz, & Nollenberger, 2021; Li & Samp, 2021). Ultimately, these challenges are not only observed at the micro level of family members, but also the macro level of the family as an institution of inequality (Laslett, 1973; Fox, 2015).

### **Family as the Institution**

During COVID-19, children are only able to socialize in the only society they know: the family. Such an institution, as cited in Coser & Coser (1990), requires the instruments, which Durkheim saw “expresses the rhythm of collective activities... [and] assures regularity” (p. 191) in a way of life. The current situation is problematic. Abrutyn’s (2021) definition of the institution as realized clusters of social consequences, provides a social environment which grounds, while simultaneously branches out, from the values of roles and duties held by individuals in their ideological spheres. In short, all interaction planes are real situations in their definitions and consequences (Thomas & Thomas, 1928). With the pandemic, these mechanisms which ensured some sustenance to alternative families are no longer a valid scaffolding, given they depend on and occur within a society which is no longer calibrated and open. Individual mechanisms of connection to a larger community which Imber-Black (2020) calls our “rituals... in special time and special places” (p. 913) have also suffered to accommodate the pandemic, though its resilience has birthed alternative forms of public expression, gatherings, and intimate connection through balcony clapping, virtual meetings, and pre-recorded interactions, respectively. These observations establish the testimony that, despite a myriad of adaptive shifts for a society which are inaccessible and unaccommodating, the maxim from Desai and colleagues (2019) persists: the “need to feel supported, valued, and loved” (p. 33) has always remained the same. For children, opportunities to branch out to social actors of ages and interests alike precludes the confinement of their first and sole institution of the home, and a major crisis inside it.

### **Relationship Conflict and Triangles**

Chronic stress is the core route to family dysfunction in Bowen’s *Family Systems Theory* (1978). Bowen’s focus on a child’s reactions to stressful events and how they relate between members are crucial indicators of how a family will function under stress (Brown, 1999). Particularly, this theoretical perspective gives the possibility for an individual to exist within and beyond the family dyad, providing the presuppositions that (i) emotional states are transferable to the circulation of its members while constructing the unit, formulating the concept of the Triangle which I will discuss further on, and that

(ii) the interaction between society (stressful events) and the family is necessary and healthy to challenge, and thus achieve, a high level of differentiation. Murdock and Gore (2004) echo the sentiment of the latter in that, “under lower stress levels, the difference in psychological distress levels was less pronounced” (p. 332), meaning that the distinction of high and low differentiated selves is more challenging without stress. However, children’s abilities to differentiate during COVID-19 are sparse and challenging. Currently, youth are bereft of prosocial institutions when left at home (i.e. friend groups, schools, recreational third spaces). This is concerning when their sole institution- the family- is unsupportive (Fish et al., 2020) and dysfunctional (Rousseau & Miconi, 2020). Thus, this makes the path to differentiation difficult, as stressful members and as such the unit of their families, are likely to *triangulate* (Bowen, 1978).

Triangulation occurs when a strain emerges between two adults and a member from the tensions of the conflict cascade to a third person: the child (termed *outsider*), who is unrelated to the initial dispute. Here, the child remains at the mitigating point of the triangle between two conflicting adults. This way, the entire anxiety of the unit reduces when a newly formed bond between the conflicted parent and the child mitigates any stress *towards* the remaining adult from the first conflict. Empirical research on Bowen’s theoretic assumptions towards triangulation mitigating stress have not always produced support. Miller, Anderson, & Keala (2007), for instance, call for specific research into the operationalization of which kind of stress is the experience of what kind of family. Recent research applying Bowen and attachment theories has also echoed these sentiments (Ross, Hinshaw, & Murdock, 2016), though new revelations support the transgenerational effect that lowly differentiated parents predicted a higher triangulation in children overtime, and that stress is a better predictor of whether one will differentiate and face anxiety (Willis et al., 2020). This becomes relevant to the study of children during COVID-19, since *triangulation* can occur between conflicting adults and their child (Bowen, 1978). Although the exact mechanisms and effects of this process have room for more empirical investigation, Bowen’s (1978) argument that “the [position of the] winner [may be] in doubt, but the final result is always the same” (p. 77) remains true: no matter the winner, the conflict remains.

In COVID-19, Lebow (2020) notes a similar situation where the question of “who is included in the boundary of close contact and who is excluded” becomes stressful for family members to navigate. Thus, when violations were less severe, conflict-ridden family members took advantage of virtual gatherings to maintain their pre-pandemic distant lives (Mazza et al., 2020). Compared to available statistics, there was indeed support to this claim, as 42% of Americans have moved to socialize virtually with family and friends (Statista, 2021b). In the case of American children, the average amount of hours spent on digital media has increased steadily since 2016 (Statista 2021a; 2021c; 2021d). In the current conflict-households under COVID-19, I argue that this triangulated anxiety propels youth to move away from the household environment, thus moving online.

### **The Third Member**

Where stress confines the society of the child's family, it is possible that anxiety originates and remains with the youth themselves (Hoyt et al., 2021). Adults overwhelmed by their work-home duties cannot serve as the placeholder for a child to mitigate their anxieties, least of all play the role of a comforting parent. Increased technology and social media use is positively associated with the anxiety levels of parents and their children (Drouin et al., 2020). Yet, the lack and lowering of parental care is no less a major concern. Prior to the pandemic, literature in family science provided a consensus that children are negatively affected into their adolescence from missing adult family members due to instability and institutional forces (see McLanahan & Jacobsen, 2014; Manning, 2015; Cavanagh & Fomby, 2019). However, parents do not have to be physically missing or incapable of caregiving in order to yield negative effects on children. In an American parent survey during COVID-19, Patrick and colleagues (2020) observed a parallel effect where only the worsening mental health of parents reflected a tantamount effect in their child's behavioural health. Therefore, a shift to virtual methods of connection by youth and adult members may provide the benefit that Wen and colleagues (2011) note, to "enhance remote families' awareness of each other" (p. 250), despite physically living together during COVID-19.

Reapplied to Bowen's *triangle*, technology becomes the 'third member' between children and adolescents versus their inconsolable stresses (Barr & Copeland-Stewart, 2021). It is important to note that Bowen did not see the presence of triangling in its members as a firm signal for dysfunctions, but rather a tool of discovering reasons and intentions of its members when conflict does occur (Brown, 1999). As such, the widespread involvement of youth and technology in most households do not necessarily mean there are equal amounts of troubling families. Instead, the implication lies in how much a child depends on the virtual space to avoid or attain the relationship of their other members. Crucially, as Brown (1999) notes, the main issue arises here when the pursuit of digital familyhood overshadows and "distracts the members of a dyad from resolving their relationship impasse" (p. 96). Here, I will discuss how intrinsic motivations to elude this conflict can be more damaging to the child while revealing more on the nature of how children define digital familyhood.

### **Differentiation and Loneliness**

As mentioned, stress is the primary route to family dysfunction and inter-member tension (Bowen, 1978). Mitigating this path was the ability to *differentiate*, which depended on the member's level of connection to their family, and their individual reactivity to stressful events (Brown, 1999). Being able to differentiate meant the semi-parting of younger members into making their independent choices while also retaining an affiliation to their family system, or *togetherness*. This way, their attempts to resolve their

own stresses are not a lone journey, hammering the notion that we are all “ultra-social animals” (Tomasello, 2014, p. 192). Akin to “the differentiation of cells from each other” (Bowen, 1978, p. 58), one’s pursuit may be explorative, but this is established in the body of the family. According to the Bowen Center for the Study of the Family (Accessed 27 August, 2021), youth in childhood and adolescence can achieve a high level of differentiation through the opportunities given by close family relationships to explore their independence. With a higher level of *differentiation*, there is considerable empirical support to Bowen’s proposition (Kerr & Bowen, 1988) that this is key to reducing trait anxiety (Tuason & Friedlander, 2000; Miller, Anderson, & Keala, 2007) and social anxiety (Peleg-Popko, 2002). However, it is crucial to note that this mitigation operated when COVID-19 did not overwhelm parents or disconnect families from wider society.

Cross-culturally, technology is utilized by youth as a method of mitigating loneliness (Caugherge et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2020). In the current study of digital familyhood in virtual worlds, these motivations to mitigate conflict and loneliness build from Bowen’s (1978) argument that “it is impossible for there to be more than relative separation between emotional and intellectual functioning” (p. 65) into how a person expresses themselves. Simply, it is not possible for a digital self to be created and played without any influence on the user’s personal emotion or intelligence. There will always be a self before and behind the screen. Thus, the motivations and meanings of such individuals are synthetic (Malaby, 2006) of real world and virtual selves. Earlier, I laid out the second presupposition of Bowen’s theory, which remarked that the interaction between society (stressful events) and family members is necessary and healthy to achieve a high level of differentiation.

### **Pre-Pandemic Experiences of Children in Virtual Worlds**

Considerable research on digital affect in children outlines the use of devices and virtual worlds for things that are unattainable in the real-world. For instance, Kafai, Fields, and Cook (2009) found that the common motivation for child users to create and live through their digital selves in an MMORPG was to fulfill a “desire for something they could not have in real life either because it was not allowed. . . or because it was impossible” (p. 34). Contextualized to my first presupposition of Bowen’s theory, the user’s desire to reshape their identity with imagined features (e.g., superpowers, radical hairstyles, piercings and tattoos) stems from the intellect of intentional, autonomous choices to increasingly differentiate. Martoncik and Loksa’s (2016) finding that the utopian experience and sense of belonging remains in the digital world also echoes the digital world as a choice determined by *autonomy* as part of their differentiation, since “many people use [and return to] MMORPGs to meet their social needs which they are unable to satisfy in the real world” (p. 128). More importantly, this process is to accommodate the self “in real life” (Kafai et al., 2009, p. 34), meaning that what is taken and explored on digital worlds must interact and synthesize to the *self* most lived of the physical world. Remark-

ably, Hota and Derbaix (2016) draws these similarities between its users. Boys try to show dominance and power through game level advancement and power, while girls prefer to improve their social status by owning avatar clothing and accessories. This realization ties itself to the second presupposition, as the *emotional* functioning of one's affiliation to real-world society and family influences is what they retain from that experience as *togetherness* in what they are seeking online, and ultimately, how differentiated they become (e.g., choosing to include their nickname in the username, wearing their favourite sports team item, or indicating their country flag).

So far, I have argued that technology has become a third member for youths to triangulate with, and that the lack of institutional support beyond the only family can create conflict and loneliness for young people. I hypothesize that in the page content of five of the most popular games on ROBLOX, they will have a higher frequency of differentiation and connection depictions, whereas markers of the SNAF and family life will be lower.

## Methods

From what we have learnt of conflict in households during COVID-19, it is natural to assume that youth may be seeking diversion and hyper-realist experiences to move away from their confined realities. However, half of the ten most popular games on ROBLOX, a MMORPG popular with children during the pandemic, are family-themed (Statista, 2021e). As the maintenance (Kafai et al., 2009) and motivation (Martoncik & Loksa, 2016) of digital selves is explored, insights are “concentrated only in the real world” (p. 128). As such, I will utilize a quantitative content analysis on the webpages of five of the most popular games on ROBLOX (Roblox.com, 2021). The choice of this Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) is due to its popularity with youth populations, given 29% of its users are ages 9-12, and 13% are 13-16 years old (Dean, 2021). More so, its engagement rose significantly from 3.7 billion hours in 2019 to 9.73 billion in the second quartile of 2021 (Dean, 2021). Therefore, a quantitative content analysis on the home pages of five virtual games where youth are expressing their needs, wishes, and interactions can provide deductive insights that are non-intrusive (as opposed to interviews or observations). Data collection occurred in one-sitting in early November to prevent any edits or changes from game developers. November was also an ideal temporal window as festivals are common occurrences in October and December, prompting changes to the page content that may not be as representative as the games were in July 2021 when its popularity surged (Statista, 2021e).

The category of DIFFERENTIATION refers to Bowen's (1978) theory which saw differentiation as a mitigator of stress and tool for individual growth (Kerr & Bowen,



1988) with children and adolescents of the family (Bowen Center for the Study of the Family, 2021). In searching for what these strategies of differentiation may look like in the virtual world, I created sub-codes under the DIFFERENTIATION category inspired by the findings of Kafai et al. (2009) that children's online motivations were to reimagine things unattainable in real life, although simultaneously these affordances also reflected real-world attitudes and norms (Hota & Derbaix, 2016). Observed depictions are coded as 'Self-definition and Creation,' under markers of individualization such as "Be yourself" and "This is your time," while 'male-typed identity' or 'female-typed identity' markers are coded as depictions on the home pages of each game that included gendered digital items such as a boy with a black skull T-shirt, or a girl with a pink dress. Finally, 'Rebellion' markers scored depictions that encouraged the redefinition or breaking of rules, such as the ability to fly, "Do anything you want" or the prospect of "unlimited possibilities" and powers.

Succeeding this, I established the tripartite markers of CONNECTION to address the experience of loneliness noted earlier (Cauberghe et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021). These markers include the Third Spaces (Oldenburg 1999) of community parks, public recreational places, and neighbourhoods under 'Community Connectedness.' In the instances where social interactions and interactions between players were encouraged, these items are marked as 'Social Connectedness.' Lastly, 'Residential Connectedness' marked those depictions which include more intimate places such as personal homes and single houses. This category served to determine whether a part of ROBLOX's popularity for its young users are more from communal sociality or personal connections.

Finally, the FAMILY category takes in account the type and extent of family and companionship in these experiences. To illustrate whether young users join these virtual worlds to escape or to remind them of their family situation, I looked for any depictions of the Standard North American Family, or the nuclear family unit: father, mother, daughter, son. This is placed under 'Parent and Child.' Conversely, 'Non-human members' coded depictions of alternative 'members' such as pets or mystical beings associated with the formation of the player's unit or family. This addresses Cherlin's (2004) foreseeing that marriage was no longer defined by the need of a household companionship; personal connection and 'familyhood' may no longer be limited to immediate members of the household for children during the pandemic, either. Finally, 'Home Structure' included any depictions of a family home, a singular residential structure associated with the SNAF, a unit of close people, or the word family to capture the game's depictions of the family home.

As such, these categories and its sub-codes serve to test the hypothesis from my literature review that, markers of DIFFERENTIATION and CONNECTION will be higher since youth are confined at home from exploring their real-world desires and meeting their friends, whereas FAMILY codes will remain low, following the logic that a stressful time for many families during the pandemic will motivate the child's online journey as a

diversion from, rather than a reminder of familyhood.

## Results

Table 1. Categorical marker frequency in five family themed ROBLOX games of 2021.

Code	Example	Frequency				
		Adopt Me	Meep City	Brookhaven RP	Royale High	BloxBurg
<b>Markers of Connection</b>						
Residential Connectedness	A picture of village houses, homes	3	1	2	1	3
Social Connectedness	“Play with millions of players”	1	2	2	5	5
Community Connectedness	Cafés, gyms, “magical lands”	1	4	3	6	3
<b>Markers of Differentiation</b>						
Female-Typed Identity	Girl holding pink journal, makeup	2	1	0	11	3
Male-Typed Identity	Boy with headphones, skull t-shirt	2	2	0	1	1
Self-Definition and Creation	“Be whoever <u>you</u> want to be”	1	3	3	4	5
Rebellion	“Buy UNLIMITED furniture!”, “use your teleportation sceptre”	0	2	3	4	3
<b>Markers of Family</b>						
Non-human Members	Picture to adopt pets in household	8	2	0	2	0
Home Structure	“ <u>Your</u> house”, pictures of homes	1	2	2	2	2
Parent and Home	Adult(s) and/or child in a home	0	0	0	0	0

Out of 42 total code inputs in the CONNECTION category, 28.5% were *Royale High* at 12 codes, followed by 26.1% of 11 codes in *BloxBurg*. The lowest coded game in this category was *Adopt Me* at 5 items, or 11.9%. Community Connectedness was the most frequent code in the five games, scoring 17 inputs, while Residential Connectedness was the lowest at 10 inputs only. These results indicate a higher preference for successful ROBLOX games to portray a larger sense of belonging. Notably, *Royale High*'s highest scoring push (6 inputs) for Community Connectedness included a mixture of third spaces and social environments, such as “dream world!”, “high school,” and a fountain plaza. Interestingly, in Residential Connectedness, depictions of homes and villages are rarely seen in games that purportedly focus on neighbourhood aspects, such as *Meep City* (1), *BloxBurg* (3) and *Brookhaven RP* (2).

Crucially, the virtual world with the most codes for Community Connectedness (*Royale High* = 6) also scored highest for Social Connectedness (*Royale High* = 5), suggesting a link between these communal spaces and sociality. By examining this virtual world in-game, its status as an outlier can be better understood: a community space rich, which, once discovered, is always tied to the potential for socialization. Figures 1 and 2 provide background in this regard.

These spaces are not only mediators of sociality, but also motivators. Figure 1 posits



Figure 1. School-based Social Groups. Figure 2. Brand Name Stores as Third Spaces (Oldenburg 1999).

the screenshot of an open-space entrance to a public building, although there are static, non-playable characters that mimic a social group, and a sign enticing players to “Join the Royale High Cheer Squad.” From this exact spot, a zoom out reveals the picture in Figure 2 as a line-up of brand name stores which serve as Third Places (Oldenburg 1999) of sociality. Ultimately, these images will contextualize many virtual worlds that drive Community Connectedness. Amongst the five games, three had a higher frequency of Community Connectedness codes than Residential ones (*Meep City* +3, *Brookhaven RP* +1, *Royale High* +5), while also scoring higher in its Social Connectedness than Residential codes (*Meep City* +1, *Royale High* +4, *Bloxburg* +2), echoing the association I suggested earlier.

Of 51 codes in the DIFFERENTIATION category, 39.2% or 20 codes belonged to *Royale High*, scoring highest in the Female-typed Identity marker at 11 codes. This was a stark finding when compared to the four other games, which had a median of 2 codes for female-typed identity markers. However, it seemed that *Royale High*’s gender-typed differentiation was only exclusive to female markers, given that its male-typed identity markers averaged with the lower modes of 1 and 2 when combined with the other titles. When calculating each of the total codes of female (17) and male-typed identity (6), a range of 11 codes or 21% ( $11/51$  total differentiation codes  $\times$  100) emerge. Given that *Royale High* was the outlier, I attempt to explain this extraneous input in the discussion. On the other hand, DIFFERENTIATION markers of Self-definition and Creation fared quite consistently across all games, achieving the median of 3 codes, and a smaller range of 4 codes apart, totalling 16 codes as the second-highest coded marker following Female-typed Identity. Notwithstanding the outlier of *Royale High*’s female-typed markers, Self-definition and Creation is the highest marker for ROBLOX’s five most popular games. This is consistent with the hypothesis that differentiation markers would be higher in the theoretical and COVID-19 research arguments in the literature review.

The FAMILY category has the lowest number of codes, with 21 entries. However, opposite to the dominance of *Royale High* in two previous categories, *Adopt Me* scored the highest. There is a simple explanation for this. Prior to gameplay, it is noticeable from page content that trading features heavily in the experience and digital economy of *Adopt Me*, highlighting pets as the main function and feature of the game, instead of the player in four other titles. Interestingly, if we ignored the Non-Human markers, *Adopt Me* became the lowest scoring game of the FAMILY category, indicating that again, an extraneous criteria pushed the game to become an outlier, similar to *Royale High* in female-typed identity markers in the prior category. Interestingly, in the absence of Non-Human Members, all five games had a median score of 2 for Home Structures and 0 for Parent and Home. These lacking results suggest that, like the first category's higher scoring Community Connectedness (17) over its Residential Connectedness (10), the sense of family as portrayed in these five popular games are more person-defined, communal-based, and represented as institutional symbols (i.e. "hang out with like-minded people") rather than individuals of the family institution (i.e., a female and male adult with a young kid).

## Discussion

Through content analysis, this study attempted to contextualize why youth are increasingly moving online to find a connection despite being at home during the pandemic. As well as providing a family theory and contemporaneous research to ground its argument, the analysis also showed what exactly was attractive to youth populations in a novel setting of connection-seeking. Notably, the analysis shows that connections are shifting from Residential depictions of social settings to Community Connectedness. These results suggest three things.

First, there is a higher volume of CONNECTION depictions for Community codes rather than Residential Connectedness. Also, Social Connectedness is prominent in these games, second only to the top 2 codes for Community Connectedness. Totalling 42 codes, this category's findings support the first section of my hypothesis that the sampled games will score higher on community markers. Furthermore, they are consistent with current literature that young people are using virtual resources to alleviate loneliness (Cauberghe et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2020), by seeking connections outside the home, both virtually and physically. Alternatively, per Mazza and colleagues (2020), these results may apply to children of conflict-ridden homes who "cling to the[se] technologies that allow [them] to know fragments of a distant life" (p. 2) of pre-pandemic third spaces, such as malls, gyms, gardens, and beaches.

Second, the emphasis on the player and their choices, rather than their singular homes resonate with the earlier discussion that a thinking of individualism and personal

growth is exposed to Western families (Cherlin, 2004). It is arguable that a desire for differentiation (which Bowen reminded us, required the support of a family) demands the necessity for a territory to express itself. As I found no codes for family members or the family home, it is assumable that familyhood is person-defined by the children. As such, a space for differentiation may instead be the potential of sociality within Oldenburg's (1999) Third Spaces, environments neither of home or work, but a middle ground for social interaction and reproduction. Earlier, I highlighted the link between Community Connectedness and Social Connectedness with three titles, including a contextualization of two figures from *Royale High* as the outlier.

It is with these findings that the nature of the family may no longer be limited to its immediate family members, but also include any description of it. Per Charles Cooley's wisdom that we are what we think others think of us, it is logical then, that 'familyhood' and belonging are built with ties that are not blood-bound or person-bound either. Social media and virtual worlds, as argued by Childress (2012), do not 'allow' us to be sociable but it is our presence as beings of social potential that allows and makes the space a social one. This study highlights the exploration of familyhood during a time of confinement in stressful homes but did not inquire into how and whether youth established families online. As such, I am only able to argue that virtual worlds may come to influence how (digital) familyhood is found and defined, and that this is likely to be successful if the digital exploration has more familiarity than fantasy.

With the symbolic interactionist viewpoint that the creation of self is due to a collaboration with others, their attitudes, and an environment to realize these desires (James 1890; Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934), the self must remain active in its search for things they want to be and how to become it (Tavory, 2016). For children during the pandemic, this situation is not difficult to imagine. Confined to their homes and constrained by social distancing and lockdown measures, they lose significant social others such as school friends or neighbourhood playmates. Moreover, without the Third Space (Oldenburg, 1999) of a school where social others, attitudes, and the child can form a sense of self, they must realize the fantasies of their own desires on the internet. While fantasies are an essential part of interaction and self (Strauss, 1959), familiarity makes their pursuit of desire almost accessible and within reach. Much of this familiar fantasy is what fuels the replayability of digital Third Places, as there is always something new yet existing to re-discover. Bart Simon argues (Concordia University, 2010, Accessed April 3, 2022), for instance, that the success of Facebook and social networking sites thrives because things like friendship are able to stay relevant. *Royale High*'s success reflects this with its Community Connectedness codes, as not only access to schools were made with its school-aged players, but that fictional brand name stores reminded them enough of a familiar world to remain interested and not overwhelmed by the fantasies of its fairy-styled game.

Having played all five games since 2019 and prior to the conception of this study, I argue that all titles except *Royale High* are set in an environment where youth players

can only express a reimagined self to trade fictional and mythical pets, maneuver vehicles which they yet cannot drive, and hold jobs and superpowers, which they do not possess. While city-esque games such as *Bloxburg and Brookhaven* RP contain infrastructures that range from workplaces, shops, and recreational hubs, its use can support Role-Playing or in-game progress through employment, rather than as stand-alone sites where value circulates in *Royale High*'s stores and third spaces. *Royale High*'s reiteration of a familiar school environment and a timely convergence of ROBLOX and real-life brands also provide a unique context for its outlier results. Where I had pointed to Hota and Derbaix's (2016) findings that gameplay motivates and expresses youth differently by sex, this study's findings also build onto their sentiment that players of *Royale High* identifying with female-typed items used digital affordances to heighten social statuses and possess cultural capitals. It is therefore unsurprising that female-typed identity markers of differentiation scored so highly in the game that is most familiar to youth players' social environment beyond their homes.

However, social environments are not the only aspect enhanced by ROBLOX's games. As indicated, it is a common finding in youth experiences online to reimagine situations and items that are unattainable in real-life (Kafai et al., 2009). This is even stronger when these items are intertwined with cultural capital and values that are synthetic (Malaby, 2006) and status markers in the real world. Contextually, there is an emergence of cultural capital synergy through collaborative music artist concerts and luxury item brands for ROBLOX players to explore as games or events (McDowell, 2021). As such, I argue that a merged experience between digital affordances and real-life desires only enhances the incentives to differentiate with digital capitals that are familiarly meaningful and monetary via microtransactions. These findings and context do not only support my second hypothesis that differentiation markers will be higher in these games, they also demonstrate the symbolic interactionist relationship of our digital and physical selves.

As hypothesized, markers of family scored the lowest across ROBLOX's five most played games which are family themed. Even with the outlier of *Adopt Me*'s Non-human markers, every title scored lowly on this indicator as well as Home Structures. More importantly, there is not a single code registered for the Parent and Home code. This finding suggests two things. Firstly, the depiction of SNAF as the symbol of family is outdated or unrecognized by these five titles. It seems that contemporaneous symbols of connection and familyhood echo Cherlin's (2004) observation that marriage was no longer affixed to the family. In this case, the SNAF is neither the placeholder or motivation for seeking 'family.' Second, where connection seems to be artificially defined and loosely based on companionship, high-scoring codes for Non-Human Members or pets are evident. Other than its use for trading, as briefly explained with *Adopt Me*, these companions are used for aesthetics or in-game progression within *Royale High* and *Meep City*.

## On the *Digitalized Other*

This study highlighted that capitals and symbolic markers- like borrowed words of a thesaurus- are tools which inform and materialize who we are and our identities per Mead's (1934) wisdom that "we talk to ourselves, but do not see ourselves" (p. 174). When interacting with a group and a larger society, Mead points out that an individual first becomes a generalized other before an insider to adopt and replicate its collective values. For digital *selves*, however, the path to belonging and actualizing the self (from the generalized other) is difficult. Where online spheres allow for the creation and realization of the self's greatest desires, one cannot expect the same to occur when the individual is no longer disposed to a device. Simply, not all benefits of the digital world are transferable to the physical (Martoncik & Loksa, 2016). This leaves the self in the physical world with a degree of otherness (Van Looy, 2015) to the one better realized and ideal; their digital self. Upon the integration into a digital world (with Mead's generalized other), a digitalized other also bears the other in its name in that any desires realized online has set the bar too high for when the individual logs off and returns to the responsibilities, shortcomings, and a life one is "obliged to dwell in" (Goffman, 1961, p. 138) of the physical world. As such, this stagnation of the player and person is the *digitalized other* (Srirachanikorn, 2021).

## Implications

By adopting a symbolic interactionist viewpoint, I argue that, sociologically, these markers and their successes reflect a general desire of youth at home during the pandemic. As interchangeable as cultural capitals can be, the projections of the self equally intertwine in two modes of existence. This stresses the importance of nurturing the bridge between youth's real-life situations at home where they nurture the *self*, and their digital *selves* who express these shortcomings and deprivations from real world troubles. In short, if they have lived a life full of conflict and loneliness in their home situation, then potentially, these problems can be identified and remedied through its digital definitions and virtual consequences (Thomas & Thomas, 1928). This is a useful framework in the current 'gold rush' for the metaverse as growing consumer demands are tantamount to corporations' efforts to curate and capitalize them (Statista, 2021f; Global Times Website, Accessed 17 December 2021). As we have seen with the success of games that synthesize real-world and digital capitals, there is ample room to speculate our abilities to deliver reliable cultural, sociological, and perhaps clinical prognoses of one's desires and imminent troubles when we submerge ourselves in the reimaginings and reiterations of our lives. With the prospect of growing digitalized others (Srirachanikorn 2021) from alleviating loneliness (Cauberghe et al. 2021) but also an expansion of social technology into the metaverse, we

must remain cognizant of the motivations behind individual's choices and interactions on these platforms. As youth users have done in this study, their desires and benefits of the digital self are taking place in the metaverse. Then, by the same token, we must prepare for the digitalized othering that comes from discrepant reimagination and reiterations of the self if its benefits and damages are "here to stay" (CNET, YouTube Website, Accessed 12 November 2021).

Even with a two-dimensional emulation, subject loneliness experienced in the digital world when a spousal avatar leaves the environment remains strongly in the physical self (Luhmann et al., 2014), countering the notion preoccupied by previous game-affect studies (Martoncik & Loksa, 2016) that a dichotomy exists between worlds of existence and its effects. The *self*, as I have argued elsewhere, is the motivation to understand (see Srirachanikorn, 2021). It is, akin to Abrutyn's (2021) interpretation that the institution is beyond a reification but a realization of social actions and consequences, a testament that the *self* is an entity which "remains curiously abstract" (Abrutyn & Lizardo, 2020, p. 6). In this case, the distinction between the physical and the virtual *self* as experienced by youth populations under COVID-19 crises is fortunately obvious and distinguishable. However, with a lack of qualitative accounts on how youth are experiencing the pandemic, we can only turn to a symbolic curiosity that what youth *selves* prefer through their digital worlds is reflective of their experience during the pandemic, and a reflection of their primary society of the family. In upcoming cultural changes, we must remain cognizant to situations at home and of the physical self, just as youth have faced this pandemic. This is key to integrating a future physical-digital space where its third spaces do not leave people as *digitalized other* or as perpetual third persons of their environments, living a projected life online of their reimagined needs, but never a reiteration of their wishes. These concerns are apt for the current study's investigation of youth populations, who are currently the social actors of tomorrow's institutions. Furthermore, emphasizing family-related symbols and prevailing conditions of the pandemic is precisely because this is their first, and currently only, society.

## Limitations

A decade ago, Cherlin (2010) strongly noted the need for new data collection on family, as his main concern was the "increasingly disconnect family membership from household living arrangements" (p. 38-39). This has now been realized as the familial disconnect of household members who are in the same household from pandemic demands and separation. As such, this study attempted to understand the experience of its youth members' retreat to the virtual world and their seeking for connection. However, the content analysis lacked a second coder, reducing the inter-reliability of the data collection. Additionally, the criteria for the FAMILY category could have included better informed descriptions to



measure the types of companionship and ‘family,’ which is unique to ROBLOX games. Therefore, the lack of preparation at this stage of the data collection meant that the results were affected by the small sample size of the category codes. As a result, the generalizability of my findings is limited to the observed five ROBLOX games, and its analysis is speculative at best due to the limitations of a quantitative content analysis. In addition, the role of digital capital and virtual economies should be given more consideration to the reasons why youth players choose certain games, and whether they use capital interchangeably between games. Other than this study’s result and discussion of *Royale High*’s outlier in female-typed identity markers, there is also considerable literature focusing on the role of digital capital and economy on the experience and expressions of young players (see Lehdonvirta, Wilska, & Johnson, 2009; Zhong, 2011, Ren et al., 2018). Focusing on the role of digital currency in creating a digital self may better portray the sociological picture of the digitalized other: is this negative state more because of an individual’s inability to physically realize their digital wishes, or is it because of a burden from the loss of pouring digital currency into a perfect picture which they cannot see beyond?

## Conclusion

To conclude, the current study into how individual motivations (i.e., differentiation) and real-world influences of social environments (i.e., conflict-ridden family and stress) provides a novel application into how synthetic ROBLOX, a metaverse, can become with its user’s lives. Youth are not only contained in crises of the global threat outside their door, but deep within their homes. These results highlight both the usage and sociological potential to better understand how youth may express and mitigate their real-world sufferings into virtual spaces dominated by capitals and social interactions. This first, original step to anchor Bowen’s *Family Systems Theory* (1978) with a symbolic interactionist lens in a unique situation where youth’s confined emotions is quantifiable and interpreted is indicative for further study. For a future where the digital sphere is successfully indistinguishable to our most preferred third spaces in the physical world, understanding a *self*’s expressed troubles will be difficult to identify, address, and treat.

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