THE RE-CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY AND GENDER IN THE EMERGING DIGITAL YOUTH CULTURE: A CASE STUDY OF THE CHINESE ONLINE GAMING COMMUNITY

by

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Abstract

With 618 million active Internet users, the mainland Chinese market now has the largest online user base in the world, of which two-thirds is engaged in online gaming (Rapoza, 2014). To better understand the impact of online gaming on the society, this thesis examines how online gaming reconstructs consumer identities and gender relationship in this emerging economy. The first part of this thesis provides a comprehensive review of the recent development of the online game market as well as the transformation of identity and gender in contemporary Chinese society. The second part of this thesis investigates how online gaming culture, as a subset of popular culture, affects individuals’ everyday lives and socio-dynamics. This thesis critically analyzes the reconstruction of identity and gender relationships among the “digital youth” population in Shanghai, mainland China. The findings highlight the embodiment and disembodiment of digital selves in the online game context. The contribution of this thesis is threefold. First, this thesis provides a critical discussion on the reconstruction of identity, gender, and consumerism at the intersection of the physical and digital worlds. Second, the findings of this study illustrate key factors that influence or mediate the construction of digital youth culture. Finally, this thesis provides insights to practitioners, marketing and consumer researchers, and policymakers regarding the positive and negative impacts of online gaming on the young generation in mainland China.
Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished work by the author, Xiao Ping Yue. The contributions of this dissertation is in reflective of gender relations and identity formations amongst the Chinese youth generation. A portion of this may be part of future journal and conference submissions. The fieldwork reported in Chapters 3 and the findings in Chapter 4 were covered by UBCO BREB # H14-01274.

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Dedication

I would like dedicate this thesis and degree as a part for my future goals and aspire in life’s success and future journey.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Since the economic reforms proposed by former PRC President Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s, mainland China has experienced a dramatic transformation in its socio-cultural environment (Naughton et al., 2008). The “market socialist” mechanism has not only created a new market environment for Chinese and international businesses but also exposed Chinese consumers to different global brands, communication technologies, and consumer ideologies (Cayla & Eckhardt, 2008; Dong & Tian, 2009; Zhao & Belk, 2008). Further, the new marketplace provides platforms for information-sharing and circulation of goods and cultural symbols as well as space for social networking and entrepreneurship. The rise of global brands and popular culture is considered an outcome of the new market socialist economy (Wu, Borgerson, & Schroeder, 2013). Online gaming, for instance, is one of the most popular entertainment activities in China and has played an important role in shaping the “Chinese youth culture”.

The dramatic rise of online gaming in China is now regarded as a subset of popular culture that influences the sociocultural environment of Chinese society. The Internet has opened up tremendous networking opportunities for today’s Chinese youth, who are significantly more technologically advanced than earlier generations that relied on face-to-face interactions (Chin, 2011). New communication technologies and devices are becoming consumers’ second or third skin (Belk, 2013), connecting and communicating their thoughts, opinions, and identity to others. Due to the large population (of 1.4 billion individuals) in China, the online gaming platform allows the youth sector to stay connected and bond with friends without stepping outside their comfortable homes, into the crowded streets and cities where monetary consumption cannot be
avoided. This can be debated as both a good aspect in convenience while resembling negative consequences such as the lack of physical exercise and face-to-face contact.

These changing social interactions and consumption patterns in fact create new challenges to Chinese society. Boellstorff (2008) argues that virtual worlds reconfigure selfhood and sociality, but this is only possible because they rework the virtuality that characterizes a human being in the actual world. The blurring boundary between online gaming and real life has created a new cultural pattern for Chinese citizens. New types of friendship, gender relationships, identities and social dynamics were found in this “synthetic world” (Castronova, 2008).

Previous studies on the fast-growing and fast-changing digital world have remained in the western context and primarily focused on topics related to challenge, control, entertainment, ego/identity building and sociability (e.g., Choi & Kim, 2004; Dal & Florence, 2008; Sherry, 2001). Limited attention has been paid to the impact of digital consumption on consumers of emerging economies such as China (with a few exceptions, e.g., Li, 2006; Wang, Zhao & Bamossy, 2008). In recent new media development in China, there is a limited discourse of gaming research focused either on gamer studies or on media governance and censorship (Damm, 2007). To address this concern, my study focuses on examining how online games affect the youth generation’s everyday lives in mainland China as well as how online gaming activities intersect the discourses of gender and identity.
1.1 Chinese Youth Consumer Behaviour

Due to the One-Child Policy\(^1\), there has been a gradual growth of the “Me” or “little emperors” generation in mainland China (Jing, 2000). In contemporary Chinese society, young adults are seeking social gratification with the current trends among their peers. Consumption, in this case, has become an important activity to present youth identity (Huang et al., 2013; Kjeldgaard & Askegaard, 2006).

Compared to their counterparts in western societies, the young generation in China has experienced more controls and restrictions in the marketplace. In China, parents have high expectations for their children, and they want their next generation to live a better life in the future. Parents have strict control over children’s everyday lives such as food consumption, education, and other consumption activities (Jing, 2000). Even though each family’s rules and regulations for each child may be different, there appears to have been a general consensus on limiting television and free time for a Chinese child. Time outside the classroom is spent either on studying or on extracurricular activities such as piano or drawing lessons. Parents concentrate all of their energy, efforts, and resources onto this single child as a result of the One Child Policy. Children, in this case, are raised in a stressful and competitive environment and many of them did not enjoy their childhoods.

The dramatic change in the Chinese economy in the past three decades has turned mainland Chinese into a more materialistic society. Chinese consumers are competing with their possessions and knowledge of (global) brands to show off their affluent status (Dong & Tian, 2009; Zhao & Belk, 2008). Marketing products or services to Chinese parents is never an easy

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\(^1\) In 1979, The PRC Government implemented a new family-planning policy and placed a de facto limit of one child for each family (Hesketh et al., 2005)
task as Chinese parents always want to maximize the benefits to their children when purchasing any consumer goods. Also, many Chinese parents do not perceive themselves as competent consumers (Chan & McNeal, 2003), so educating these decision-makers and purchasers presents its own challenges to marketers. For instance, marketers of electronic games must present the games to parents as creative and educational before presenting them to children as fun and exciting. Due to the strict parental control in China, their decision on gaming restrictions may greatly influence a child’s teenage years, particular males.

1.2 Online Gaming Industry in Mainland China

Online gaming is one of the fastest-growing consumer markets in mainland China. The revenue generated is significant and has quadrupled since 2008. China’s gaming industry generated more than US$13.5 billion in revenue in 2013, up from $9.8 billion in 2012 (Millward, 2014). Even though the yearly revenue percentage growth may be on a downward slope, the Chinese gaming industry is projected to take in an estimated 150 billion RMB or more annually by 2017. The online gaming market is current dominated by major Chinese corporations. For instance, Tencent, the parent company of popular instant messengers QQ and WeChat, is currently the biggest gaming giant in mainland China and has developed hundreds of online games in the past decade (Millward, 2014).

Takahashi (2015) reported that there are currently over 274 million Chinese online gamers in 2015 and is believed to reach 359 million by 2019. The online gaming market is an important segment of the youth market. In a 2008 study, 21% of Chinese gamers reported playing more than 10 hours a week and on average spent 7.3 hours per week in online gaming
activities (Shanghai Daily, 2008). In terms of demographics, the Chinese gaming population is currently composed of 73% males and 27% females with 9.3% below the age of 19 (mainly as a result of government regulations and parental control), 55% between 19 and 25 (as the majority age of gamers) and the remaining 35.7% above the age of 26 (Figure 1.1). This information shows that the online game market is a male-dominated market and the majority of the gamers are teenagers and young adults.

(Millward, 2014)

Figure 1.1 Online Chinese Gamers by Age
As for gaming locations, most of the gamers (73%) primary play time is at home while 19% is spent at gaming cafés, 4% at school, and 3% at work (Figure 1.2). Home (including dormitory rooms) seems like the most comfortable locale for most gamers.

According to Millward (2014), the most popular online game genres are: 1) action roleplaying games, 2) first-person action and 3) shooting games, 4) platform 2D games, 5) turn-
Based on role-playing games, strategy games, racing games, virtual community games, music and dance games, and chess and puzzle games. Among all gaming genres, the action role-playing games (Action RPGs) are the most popular genre and accounted for 59.5% of all online gaming platforms in 2013.

1.3 The Surge of Online Gaming Culture in Mainland China

In China, most of the parents of young adults live with “digital illiteracy” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008) because of their limited education and exposure to new technologies in the past. The digital world, therefore, is considered the “world” of the younger generation in China. In this “youth-only” space (particularly seen through mobile devices, at university dormitories and gaming cafes), young Chinese consumers, without their parents’ supervision or monitoring, can freely construct and present their desired identities to their peers in the online world. There are various ways for individuals to construct new identities online, ranging from creating their own profiles on social networking sites to having their own webpages or blogs (or mini-blogs) to creating avatars that represent their personalities in online games. Some youngsters even create entirely new personae that distance them from the real world. Gamers’ identities within online games may explain their willingness to maintain emotional and behavioural commitments to the gaming community. In addition to being “present” in the online game community, gamers engage in various activities such as information-seeking and -sharing, knowledge-creating and consuming to reinforce their “in-group” identities (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000). In their study on multiplicity and identity in online gaming, Jenson et al. (2015) provided insights into online
gaming by gendered practices as rather more nuanced than simply “one-to-one” understanding of identification practices in regard to players and their avatars.

Understanding that people may use fake identities or avatars to represent themselves online, many individuals believe that now they have the option of playing a role without having to face the real-life social consequences (Kozinets, 2008; Tumbat & Belk, 2011). This is great in personal privacy but yet online violence and hate speech may develop as a result. Virtual world is now a liminal space (as described by Van Gennep, 1960) where consumers can feel empowered in China through online gaming.

As mentioned in the previous section, the online gaming market is a male-dominated market; therefore, some established cultural aspects of masculinity dominate the gaming experience and industry. Previous studies on gender in online gaming in the North American context reported that males had indicated a strong opposition to females playing online games and perceived gaming as an all-boys club, a space of exclusivity (O’Rourke, 2013). The extent to which women are seen in online games appears to have affected gamers’ attitudes toward women both online and offline. Sometimes females may be represented as independent and capable characters, but they continue to be highly sexualized and often displayed to please men. The development of gender and changes in gender relationships need further study.

Gender relationship and differences are not limited to the in-game experience; the surge of online gaming culture also brings these issues to a more public arena. The recent introduction of the China Joy Entertainment Expo in Shanghai aims to cater to the needs and wants of consumers more than members of the game industry. Conventions and exhibitions usually are related to potential business affairs, or possibly for media exposure of the latest product releases. However, the China Joy Entertainment Expo is predominantly a sexualized space to entertain
male gamers. Booths at the expo featured stages—not for showing off games, but rather for the display of showgirls, or booth babes (Takahashi, 2014a), dressed in skimpy and showy costumes. Game demonstrations were relegated to the sides and rear of most booths. The majority of the male audience at the expo appeared to have been there mainly to take pictures of or with these showgirls and to possibly get free promotional items along with some gaming merchandise/experience. This blatant sexual display, however, was rather unusual for China. China used to have strict limits on sexual freedoms. The ban on internet pornography is one of the exemplars (Takahashi, 2014a).

Even though the online gaming industry has been very successful in this emerging economy, Chinese society remains critical of the negative impact of online gaming on young adults, connecting these activities to immaturity. Peng and Liu’s (2010) study found that gamers’ maladaptive cognitions, shyness, and depression are positively related to online gaming dependency. The negative life outcomes of these online dependencies include physical, personal, and academic or job-related problems as a result of addiction and continuous play. However, their study also identified some positive impacts of online gaming such as community-building and bonding among friends. In recent years, there has been a substantial change in demand for community-building as gamers are more likely to build up communities and prefer online relationships to offline ones.

1.4 PRC Government and Online Gaming

The PRC government always pays close attention to gaming and online gaming as well as other internet activities in mainland China. As mentioned earlier, the Chinese government has
banned internet pornography in order to control discussion of and access to sexuality via the new communication platform. Also, China has officially banned console video games since 2000, citing their adverse effect on the mental health of its youth (Carsten, 2014). In addition to limits on access to gaming devices, the Chinese government requires that all PCs sold in China include a software package to filter “vulgar” content. This is widely seen as a general attempt by the government to filter and censor online content, including politically sensitive material (Zhang, 2013). Aside from the regulatory issues, including censorship, the positive role of the Chinese government is very limited in this sector; thus, some reinforcements should take place in solving some of the issues surrounding the gaming industry. Current regulations, including adults-only gaming cafés and hourly playtime restrictions for children, are minor steps in the direction of change. Beyond these limitations, game rating systems like the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) will be implemented to educate or inform young gamers about the content and evaluations of existing games. It is critical to encourage educational advancement with current technologies.

In addition to government regulations, China is one of the first countries in the world to classify all forms of Internet addiction as a clinical disorder. It is mentioned that the underlying cause of many youths’ attraction to online gaming is their dysfunctional relationships with their parents (Brown, 2014). Yet parents are forcing children into military boot camps to combat their online gaming addictions. This shows a darker side of gaming and complicates the roles of the gamer, parents and the government in a socialist market economy.

Political culture is very much infused into online games (Jenkins et al., 2006). Since China is one of the few remaining communist countries and a dominant world power, the government often seeks to spread political propaganda and nationalistic pride. With the incentive
provided by the government, some domestic Chinese online game developers started introducing games to promote patriotism and combat foreign influences. On a related note, government agencies also have been using online games to fight various social problems such as corruption. One instance of this is *Incorruptible Warrior*, an online game launched by Ningbo City officials. The game’s main objective was to fight against political corruption. This was carried out through the players’ use of weapons and supernatural powers that can kill corrupt government officials, their mistresses and their family members (Chao & Ye, 2007). The endorsement of these games proved to be more of a minor psychological victory rather than a tactical one, since no real actions were physically taken against these corrupt officials until the recent regimes carried out by the current PRC President, Xi Jinping (Hernandez, 2015). Working with the government and Chinese companies, the foreign gaming giants were able to enter the industry, creating huge popularity and leading to a decline in these nationalistic online games.

### 1.5 Research Design

This thesis is based on a three-month-long ethnographic study in Shanghai, mainland China. My study aims to critically examine the development of concepts such as identity, gender, and virtual materiality among the young Chinese online gaming demographic. The main research question is how do Chinese youth re-construct gender and identity in the online game community? This revolves around how online game culture influences gendered behaviours as well as the meaning of possessions in the contemporary consumer society in mainland China. This study also explores how traditional and modern Chinese ideologies influence the identity projects and
gender relationships of online gamers. Currently in academia, there is little research on these aspects of online games (with a few exceptions such as Griffiths, Davies & Chappell, 2004), and even less specifically concentrating on Chinese youth gaming culture.

Even though online gaming is one of the fastest-growing markets in this emerging economy, it is still fraught with many issues and challenges, including the cultural shift toward a female empowered youth generation in mainland China. There are six particular areas displayed as a spiderweb surrounding/affecting the gendered Chinese youth gaming culture, all of which will be examined and addressed in this paper. These include the individual, other online gamers, family/peers/girlfriends (non-gamers), industry (marketers), government (policymakers), and lastly societal (ideological) factors. Each of these areas will be further explained with various themes in the findings taken from the fieldwork data.

This thesis contributes to the field of consumer research in three ways: first, this thesis provides a critical discussion on the reconstruction of identity, gender, and consumerism at the intersection of the physical and digital worlds. Second, the findings of this study illustrate key factors that influence or mediate the construction of digital youth culture. Finally, this thesis provides insights to practitioners, marketing and consumer researchers and policymakers regarding the positive and negative impacts of online gaming on the young generation in mainland China.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Consumer Identity

In online gaming, players form, enact and partake in the consumption of various identities. Consumer identity has drawn tremendous attention in the field of consumer research in the last few decades (e.g., Ahuvia, 2005; Belk, 1988). Early in the 1950s, Levy (1959) asserted that people do not buy products just for what they do, but also for what the product means; thus, brands can be symbols whose meaning is used to create and define a consumer’s self-concept. Consumer researchers argue that consumer desire is integral to one’s identity formation and change (Belk, Ger & Askegaard, 2003). Social solidarity and the creation of “distinctive, fragmentary, self-selected, and often transient” (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, pg. 873) global culture, for instance, can be seen from inquiries about common consumption interests (Belk & Costa 1998; Kozinets 2002; Schouten & McAlexander 1995).

Arnould and Thompson (2005) observe that “consumer culture denotes a social arrangement in which the relations between lived culture and social resources, and between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic and material resources on which they depend, are mediated through markets” (p. 869). They further point out that the importance of examining consumer identity arises from co-constitutive and co-productive approaches. Previous studies on consumer identity examine consumers’ identification practice in respect to possessions (e.g., Belk, 1988), social class (Holt, 1998), sexual orientation (Kates, 2002), relationship with others (Joy, 2001; Sherry, 1983), relationship with brands (Fournier, 1998), lifestyle and desire (Belk, Ger & Askegaard, 2003; Hirschman, 1988; Thompson & Tambyah, 1999) and consumption
ideologies and occasions (Kozinets, 2002; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004). Consumer researchers have also examined the formation and negotiation of group identities such as family, fan community or brand community (e.g., Epp & Price, 2008; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001; Muniz & Schau, 2005).

Consumer goods often embody a symbolic meaning that extends beyond their specific functional usage (Levy 1959; Belk 1988). Material possessions have played an important role in defining the consumer’s identity. Belk (1988) was the first to link this aspect to consumer behaviour research and found that “knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally or unintentionally, we regard our possessions as parts of ourselves (p. 139).” In a similar vein, Sivadas and Mcleleit (1994) define self-extension to possessions as “the contributions of possessions to identity,” (p. 143). These are not only cues for people around use to create impressions of who we are, but also signs of one’s particular individual and collective memory.

Our consumer behaviour is closely connected to our relationships. Belk (1988) pg. 157 states that “relationships with objects are never two-way (person-thing), but always three-way (person-thing-person)”. Ahuvia (2005), extending the study on possession and relationships, found that consumers use the things they love to construct a sense of self in the face of identity conflicts. While Belk emphasizes that a portion of our lust for an object displays a competitive connection with other human beings who may likewise have desire for the possession, Ahuvia (2005) found that love of possessions may help with “symbolically demarcating the boundary between the self and identities that the consumer rejects” (p. 182). It also can “symbolically support an identity that combines potentially conflicting aspects of self” (p. 182). This means the particular tensions amongst the consumer’s previous identity versus his or her desires and
struggle between concepts of who the consumer should be in which are supported by socializing factors.

Recently, consumer researchers have become aware the dynamicity and multiplicity of consumer identity. Tian and Belk (2005) discovered that the objects in one’s office are often a reflection of the “tug-of-war” amongst one’s home and work self-identities. In their study on multiple and dialogical selves, Bahl and Milne (2010) discovered that an informant’s “closed self” enjoys eating donuts as a food of comfort while his “critical self” views donuts as something fattening that is unattractive to the opposite sex. The “athletic self” will also combat donuts as a factor in lowering the quality of his soccer play. Various strategies are used in a discourse between different selves with the result reaching a meta-self. Belk (2014) argued that these strategies involve “managing the conflict through negotiation or coalition, avoiding the conflict, for example by compartmentalizing and accepting that different selves will prevail on different occasions, or privileging a dominating self that suppresses the other selves” (p.252). This concept of singular core self, as a result, may simply end up being an illusion after all. Belk’s (2014) view takes the perspective of multiple self-identity, the extended/expanded self encompassing sequentially/simultaneous different personas/selves that can sense various “attractions, repulsions, attachments, and alienations (pg. 252)” with respect to a certain objects. The contradictory selves, according to Belk (2014), can be cured via three methods: 1) selecting one self over the others and distinguishing this self with choice of loved objects; 2) compromising the selves by discovering the middle-ground objects that are compatible with conflicting identities; or 3) synthesizing selves by discovering objects that permit each identity to be recognized and reconciled (p. 251).
2.1.1 Consumption, Community Formation, and Social Relationship

Consumers are no longer passive agents; they, in fact, are adjusting to marketer-generated materials in forming into a coherent, diversified and fragmented sense of self (Belk 1988; McCracken 1986). McCracken (1986) believed that the consumer “is the final author and essential participant in the process of meaning transfer” (p. 75). He argued that culture is transferred from the culturally constituted world of everyday experience, via the fashion and advertising system (which represents the first stage of the trajectory), to consumer goods and then through various rituals (including taking possession of the meaning of a consumer good, which represents the second stage of the trajectory) until finally the meaning is transferred to individual consumers. By using these possession rituals, consumers shift cultural meaning out of their goods and into their lives. In this manner, individuals create a personal world of goods that reflects their own experience and concepts of self and world (McCracken, 1986).

Studies on consumption and relationship are not limited to consumer-possession or consumer-brand relationships but also encompass consumer-to-other relationships. In their study on swap meets and flea markets, Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf (1988) found that consumers use their material possessions to form and exchange social dynamic relationships as ways of extending their selves. Similarly, Price, Arnould and Curasi (2000) and Curasi, Price and Arnould (2004) noticed that older generations and families perceive inalienable wealth in the form of cherished possessions and keepsakes. These possessions are not only an extension of the self but also an extension of the family.

Consumers sometimes communicate their identities through interpersonal interaction and exchange of goods. Gift-giving, for example, is another aspect in the initiation of meaning
transfer. Consumers insinuate various symbolic aspects into the lives of a gift recipient (McCracken, 1986). This displays a development and structuring of a moral economy from the self and others around. Sherry (as cited in Giesler, 2006, p. 284) viewed gift-giving as a “continuous cycle of reciprocities and theorizes the gift exchange process as a dialectical chain of gift and token gift transactions between two gifting partners”. Age and gender roles are factors affected and enacted within the consumer society in gifting. Other researches in the field of consumer research examined the agapic (“unselfish”) gift-giving practice among lovers (Belk & Coon 1993) and social ties in Hong Kong (Joy, 2001).

The study of consumer identity has extended to the collective level as well. For instance, studies on brand community (e.g., Cova & Cova, 2002; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995) seek to examine interactions among individuals who are impassioned by a particular brand. This set of theoretical work presents the group or “tribal” behaviour as an expression of both self and social identity, grouped around something emotional rather than rational (Cova & Cova, 2002). This created a new social order, different from those of historical tribes. Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) refers to the term “brand community” as “a collective specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among users of a brand” (p. 412).

In their study on the Apple Newton brand community, Muniz and Schau (2005) found that consumers were engaged with each other, and that they developed a collective shared mythology accentuating the unfair abandonment of their brand, its amazing abilities, and its possible revival in the system of a rumored newer model. These users realized community participation and engagement resulted in the reinforcement in reality of this particular brand mythology, boosting users to continue partaking in the consumption of outdated technology. Similarly, Schouten and McAlexander's (1995) study on the Harley-Davidson brand community
found that consumers develop brand relationships due to the results of interaction with other consumers and the brand, thus establishing collective subcultures of consumption. These brand communities present a critical aspect of the collectiveness of consumer-to-consumer marketing and relationships. Furthermore, fan/consumer community can be seen in Kozinets' (2002) study of the Burning Man Festival. Even though participants may conceive materiality a part of the market, they are able to productively develop a collective temporary hyper-community with the purpose of practicing divergent social logics. If there is a way to escape from the traditional market, it needs to be conceived of as similarly temporary and local.

Subculture consumption is closely connected to collective consumer identity projects. In his study on contemporary gay subcultures, Kates (2002) found a different form of consumption in subcultures as opposed to ones with authenticity and uniformity (Belk & Costa, 1998). This is similar to the gaming community in the purchase of virtual goods. The gay community is filled with enriched oral/written histories that lead to the subculture's variety of dynamic content, forms, and meanings (Chauncey, 1994; Weeks, 1985). However, the gay community was also stigmatized throughout its history with various forms of oppression and marginalized by many institutions (Weeks, 1985). Gaming communities were stigmatized as well, particularly by the older Chinese generation. Traditional subcultures step into costume (literally and figuratively) during weekends or special ritualistic occasions. Yet, for the gay men here, affiliation with the subculture and the associated social-identity issues are more consequential for consumption. Gay subculture sustains as “a way of thinking … a set of ideas about politics, high culture, pop culture, society, religion, manners, fashion, and … sex … ideas inside of which a relatively small proportion of gay people spend their entire adult lives … and with which virtually every gay man has some sort of relationship” (Bawer, 1993, p. 4). The theoretical framework that is applied
demonstrates the individual’s perception of his or her identity as stigmatized or separate from conventional others, reflexively comprehends symbolic boundaries, socializes into a group of alternate values institutionalized in the confined context, and strives to obtain individual distinction relative to others who embrace the same subculture (Kates, 2002).

Rahman et al.’s (2012) study on youth cosplay subculture in Hong Kong found individuals wearing different masks to either reshape or contrast their varying temporary identities and roles over the course of self-formation within the community into something different from the ordinary societal mainstream structure. Warren and Campbell’s (2014) study of punk band Minor Threat contrasted its image to Green Day’s polished and catchy songs; Minor Threat’s radical ideology, lo-fi recordings, and rough vocals remain cool within a small subculture that considers the divergent, counterculture behaviour appropriate. Hebdige (1979) examines how the youth-oriented punk music subculture expresses contradictions in the social mainstream using alternative stylistic materiality through an anarchist display of working-class rebellion.

2.1.2 Online Communities and the Construction of the Digital Self

With the popularity of digital technologies, consumers have extended their identification practices to the virtual world. The development of digital self has started drawing academia’s attention in the past two decades (e.g., Belk, 2013; Schau & Gilly, 2003; Zhao, 2005). Agger (2004) uses the term “virtual self” to refer to “the person connected to the world and to others through electronic means such as the Internet, television, and cell phones” (p. 1). Zhao (2005) coined the term “digital self” to refer to internet-mediated self-construction. He identified four
characteristics of the digital self: (1) inwardly oriented, (2) narrative in nature, (3) retractable, and (4) multiplied (p. 395). The retractable and multiplied nature of the digital self also presents the fluidity and dynamicity of self-identity in the virtual world. Belk (2015) employed Cooley’s (1992) notion of “looking-glass self” to describe the co-constructive nature of the digital self. He argued that a consumer’s self-identity is driven by others’ responses such as online tagging, comments and endorsements.

In addition to the conceptions of digital self or virtual self, consumer researchers were interested in exploring how consumer identity and the notion of materiality transform in the virtual worlds. Slater (1997) argues that contemporary consumption can be described by the expansion of dematerialization of objects and commodities. In the virtual world, items are composed entirely of digital codes, and rely fully on consumers’ dreams, fantasies, and preferences (Lehdonvirta, 2009). In virtual environments, users can own virtual items they might not otherwise obtain in a tangible, material way (Molesworth & Denegri-Knott, 2007). In addition, virtual consumption allows gamers to participate in various economic activities designed to fulfill their desires in the virtual realm (Drennan & Keeffe, 2007). Lehdonvirta (as cited in Nagy & Koles, 2014, p. 1126) describe “virtual objects are unique—even worth competing for—given the associated privileges, special powers, or social status derived from them that are also recognized by other users.”

In the case of this kind of consumption, the extension of the self to digital possessions has been explored only recently (Belk, 2013). Siddiqui and Turley (2006) studied the role of “virtual possessions” as replacements for physical possessions and concluded that some participants were rather reluctant to give up a physical object (e.g., a letter, photo, song, etc.) for a digital copy. According to Odom et al. (2011), teenagers can bond with their digital items, which has
implications for the need for research on human-computer interaction. They mention that consumer behaviorists describe self-extension as an imperative characteristic of attachment to possessions. Schau and Gilly (as cited in Arnould & Thompson, 2005) presentation of web-space as consumers’ integration of brands and hyperlinks in order establish “multiple nonlinear cyber self-representations without necessarily sacrificing the idea of an integrated self” (pg. 871).

Kedzior (2009) believes that a non-material object of consumption usually has a physical referent that can act as a locus for the meaning. He argues that “objects in digital materiality differ dramatically, as even though they might have their physical referents, they do not require them in order to exist” (p. 23). Consumers perceive their virtual consumption, for example, in the netnographic study of Second Life as real since players illustrate this “lived experience” inside the realm of the virtual world. This means that their “subjectivity moved along the confines of digital materiality” (Kedzior, 2009, p. 23).

Lehdonvirta (2012) portrays materiality in the virtual world as “no such thing as completely immaterial consumption” (p. 22). Virtual goods are no less real or able to satisfy desires than material items. However, consumers’ usage is restricted to particular circumstances, much as gardening and kitchen tools are used in different places. In line with Lehdonvirta’s argument, Belk (2013) points out that all identities are in fact virtual identities—“(consumers) are expressed through material or virtual goods, our external identity and internal sense of self are imaginary constructs or working hypotheses subject to constant reform” (p. 479). Similarly, he also states that “we continue to have traces of our consumption that act as cues to personal and aggregate sense of past, except that rather than being encoded only in private possessions, productions, and photos, we are now more likely to turn to digitized and shared mementos online” (p. 490). As with the advancement of the digital age and the evolving concern for further
research in the field of digital consumption, a research gap has emerged in the development of social relationships (Belk, 2013) within the virtual world, where identities are interchanging and the meaning of material possessions is constantly evolving.

2.2 The Emergence of Youth Culture and the Development of “Youth” Identity

In China, online gaming for males is particularly related to the youth identity and culture. Previous literature shows that within the recent economic growth and the surge of the middle class around the world, facilitates the emergence of an overall global youth culture (Kjeldgaard & Askegaard, 2006). Castells (1996, 1997) points out that we are living in a “network society”, and members of the young generation obtain information and inspiration from global sources. Consumer researchers found that the youth have developed a tendency to put the “self” at the very center of their discourse (e.g., Kjeldgaard & Askegaard, 2006; Wooten, 2006). Youth treat the self and its identity development, realization or affirmation as the ultimate source of consumption needs and desires. This has led to a view of consumers determined primarily by the youth’s own “lifestyle choices” and decision-making rather than by structural factors like age, sex and class. Youth consumers now seemed to be “a priori socially displaced” (Arvidsson, 2001). In other words, the youth generation have a more dynamic role in relation to identity construction.

During their transition from childhood to adulthood, it is very important for young people to construct their own images and styles from the available resources (Cieslik & Pollock, 2002). Eisenstadt (1956) stated that “the adolescent is seeking some framework for the development and crystallization of his identity, for the attainment of personal autonomy, and for his effective
transition into the adult world” (p.32). In a similar vein, Mueller (2007) states that there is a “cultural generation gap” between the younger generation and the adults. He argues that the younger generation and the adult are living in two different “cultures” and it is a challenge to communicate the norms and other cultural content of one generational group to the other. Youth culture sometimes is considered a form of resistance or rebellion. Wallace and Kovacheva (1996), for example, pointed out that “youth cultures can be a form of resistance to dominant definitions of what young people should be, or it can be a way of creating some independent alternative identity based around peer groups [rather] than formal structures” (p. 190).

The youth identity project has arisen from the reflexive notion that the self is the borderline of preferences among a large group of lifestyle choices; arrangement of material consumption matters. Differences in values, beliefs and behaviors as well as the increasing media and market influences turn the “youth” into a unique segment in the consumer society. Kjeldgaard and Askegaard (2006) further pointed out that young consumers engage in a unique “conspicuous and leisure-oriented consumption” (p. 48), which to great extent is intertwined with the identity negotiation that is typically part of this life stage.

Youth experience a normal process of "identification" through which they obtain social roles by consciously and unconsciously imitating the behavior of others (Mowen, 1993, p. 777). Wilska (2003) argues that youth consumption is primarily based on hedonism, visibility and open thoughts. For Wilska (2003), the youth’s hedonistic actions are, however, still governed by limitations established by certain dominant social frameworks. For instance, these include societal norms, familial preference and institutional regulations that constrain the openness and freedom of hedonistic actions. The hedonic nature of youth consumption, in fact, creates tremendous market opportunities; marketers have acknowledged that possessions achieve
meaning through the socialization process (Solomon, 1983). In their research on young Chicago residents’ consumption practices, Csikszentmihalyi and Halton (1981) realized that members of the youth generation are more likely to portray their favorite possessions as those that reflect ability or skills, such as athletic products, or those through which they can display some sort of control, such as musical instruments. Ball and Tasaki (1992) examined the role of attachment and found that attachment to certain merchandise was in fact greater amongst 15-to-24-year-olds. This may be related to the concept of aspiration and future performance for possessions.

The youth generation often times may want to be older in order to obtain what they perceive adults to have. Money would be a great example, as this could be viewed as a source of power (Belk, 1988). Products sought by youths are often symbols of the power perceived to be held by adults (Gentry et al., 1995). The concept of possessions for the young may vary depending on their goals for the future. Young consumers want to be happy and satisfied now and may not understand or even care about what they will become. In this sense, there are growth opportunities to explore the construction of youth culture as well as how that culture is operating in the consumer society and in different cultural settings.

2.3 Gender and Consumption

Gender literature observes that gender is an outcome of social construction. Gender roles are reflections of the power dynamics and social structures shaped by cultural institutions (Risman, 1998; Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). Butler (1990) once said that “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender ... identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results.” (p. 25). This is mostly the actions that one does at
different times, as opposed to a universal idea of *who one is*. Butler further argues that our identities, gendered and otherwise, do not signify the authentic inner “core” self but are rather a dramatic *effect* (as opposed to the cause) of our performances. In a similar vein, Gauntlett (2008) points out the “free-floating” nature of gender. He argues that the concept is not linked to an “essence”, but instead a performance. Joy et al. (2015) brings Judith Butler’s performativity and precarity into light by exploring the thoughts on gender and violence in India.

Among all kinds of consumption and identification practices, gender is definitely one of the most problematic and controversial categories in the marketplace. Gender identity can also be viewed as rather a reflection upon one’s self-esteem that has been presented in relation to the sex role self-concept (Spence et al., 1975). Golden et al. (1979) portrayed sex role self-concept as more significant for feminine product views than masculine product perceptions. However, the authors found sex and product usage is at least as important for merchandise perceptions as sex role self-concept. In his research on masculinities in cultural consumption in London, Mort (1996) found that consumption is “the site of a future utopia, which revolved around the world of goods,” and this resulted in “an expansion in the sense of self and sexual identity” (p. 187). From the foundation of the plurality of male identities, commercial marketing has “shaped the interiority of experience” of those who were involved. “Commercial signposts” came to occupy a significant part in young men's narratives of self (p. 205). This marketplace has managed to dramatize various intriguing concepts about the meaning of masculinity and sexuality. Most significantly, this resulted in the growth of gendered commerce that created space for the emergence of homosocial identities in the 1980s.

Feminists always criticize marketers as key in shaping and reinforcing gender stereotypes. For instance, in her longitudinal study on women in advertisements, from her
documentaries, Kilbourne found that women are more often depicted in physically defensive positions than men. Female bodies are regularly portrayed as subordinate to men—acting as a footstool for men or kissing a man’s shoe instead of his lips. Other depicts such as eating disorders, gold-diggers, models and transformation into objects were frequently observed in commercials (Cambridge Documentary Films, 1979, 1987; Media Education Foundation, 2000, 2010). Venkatesh et al. (2010) portrays shoppers’ outlooks and inclinations linking to bodily image are connected to their ideals in the aesthetics of fashion. Marketers of magazines have also been active in creating new femininity ideals by emphasizing flawlessness and passivity and encouraging females to take up less space. There is a need for more responsibility in the portrayal of the “woman” figure (Conley & Ramsey, 2011).

Previous studies on gender and consumption have examined how class, gender, and social relations are interplayed in different market settings, including gendered servicescapes such as men’s barbershops (e.g., Fischer, Gainer, & Bristor, 1998) or retail spaces such as ESPNZone (Sherry et al., 2004) and American Girls Place (Borghini et al., 2009). These gendered retail spaces are key sites to represent and reinforce ideological imperatives regarding femininity/masculinity, motherhood/fatherhood and communality. Places like the American Girl retail stores inspire consumers to have a captivating experience in grasping the rites of passage encompassing heroic femininity, resulting in the diffusion of a family template of domesticity. Other studies examine gender differences in consumption practice. For example, Haytko and Baker (2004) found shopping malls are key social and experiential places for teenage girls in the United States. In their studies on organized sports, Bristor and Fischer (1993) and McGinnis and Gentry (2002) noticed that most sports are male-dominated and there is a significant gender gap in the sports environment. Women therefore tended to bond with each other in sports activities
such as golfing. These elements may cause females to become hypersensitive and excessively reliant upon other women.

Holt and Thompson (2004) found that American straight White middle-class males develop multiple “man-of-action heroes” models to reinforce their masculinity ideals in society. Men use consumption of masculinity to fashion themselves as man-of-action heroes “whether at work or play, as fathers or friends or husbands, at home or on vacation” (p. 436–437). Similarly, Moisio et al. (2013) found productive consumption is solicited in the production of men’s identity in do-it-yourself (DIY) home-improvement projects. Men differentiate themselves based on their skills and knowledge in home-improvement tasks. High-cultural-capital consumers are connected with productive consumption that is intertwined with leisure experiences that can resemble the craftsman ideal. Meanwhile, low-cultural-capital informants ratify an identity concept of family-handymen by portraying themselves as equitable, masculine family agents. Martin, Schouten, and McAlexander (2006) found that female Harley-Davidson bikers overturn the hyper-masculinity that is essential to the brand image and subvert female gender stereotypes to create meanings in facilitating the onward movement of their personal identity projects. While most of the prior studies on gender and consumption were limited to retail and physical consumption spaces (e.g., retail outlets, sports activities), how male and female consumers interact and consume in virtual communities provides a logical next context to consumer research on this topic.

In emerging economies such as India and Turkey, gender norms and social class play an important role in defining the treatment men and women receive (Joy, Belk & Bhardwaj, 2015; Üstüner & Holt, 2007). While Butler (1990) argued the performative nature of gender identity, it is important for consumer researchers to examine how men and women in emerging economies
“perform” their gender identities and how they construct the masculine and feminine ideals in particular cultural settings.

2.3.1 Gender and Youth Culture

Gender identity and the awareness of gender difference develop in an early stage of our lives. Counter to the Freudian idea of the oedipal complex, Rotundo (1994) argues that reaching male adulthood requires contemplating and refusing to accept maternal culture. For Rotundo, a boy obtains masculine skills and traits from other boys as opposed to his own father, since the father often provides little guidance. Girls’ childhood play culture, in contrast, is often “interdependent” and their toys are designed to foster female-specific skills and competencies and prepare girls for their future domestic responsibilities as wives and mothers (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998). In this case, toy manufacturers are playing a key role in shaping gender roles in society.

As mentioned earlier, members of the youth generation are looking to develop their own identities, to become “distinct” from their parents and to become their “own person”. As adolescents struggle to shape their own self-identity, they may pursue certain possessions (Belk, 1988). These possessions can be part of their strategy for the future reflection of power and control. Male teenagers, for instance, are consumers of “macho” merchandise such as cars, clothes, and cologne. These possessions are used to strengthen their rather weak masculine self-concepts (Solomon, 1983).

Alexander (1999) argued that contemporary mass media shows how contradictory concepts about female gender play a critical role in telling girls what they should fulfill and
become by methodically analyzing the conflicting images of women in music videos. This gave a deeper understanding and meaning to the formation of the dominant youth culture’s construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction. Dyson (1996) described the aggressively defiant Black masculinity enacted in the cultural field of rap music and its mimetic diffusion into the identity practices of younger White males and the public personas of iconic White rappers.

Hausman (2000) observed that consumers have a variety of hedonic needs—for instance, the need for fun. In their study on clothing consumption, Chen-Yu and Seock (2002) found that the key role of clothing is to satisfy and please female adolescents in relation to hedonic needs. Their findings showed that young females purchased expressively at a greater rate than males and had more recreational clothing purchase motivation. Various information resources including books, magazines and friends had greater effect over clothing consumption choices made by females as opposed to males (Chen-Yu & Seock, 2002). In sum, previous studies on gender and consumption show that gender identity has been developed in various directions among the youth generation. Marketers are active in associating their offerings with gender-specific meanings and targeting the young generation. In other words, marketers have become “educators” in this gender education lesson.

2.3.2 Re-Construction of Gender Identity in the Virtual World

The rapid growth of social media is also changing the construction of gender identity. Nagy and Koles (2014) describe gender identity elements, characterizing the process of virtual self-representation as of particular interest. Their study found that males focused predominantly on their possible or hidden self-aspects while females focused more on their ideal selves. They
also noticed that males appeared to establish avatars that were based on their actual possible or hoped-for selves. This observation was in line with the prior work of Markus and Nurius (1986) and Higgins (1987), in which male consumers preferred to relate their actual self to their ideal self as well as imagine what they could reach in their future lives. Females, on the other hand, used this endeavor to actualize their idealized self-aspects and created avatars that were often completely different from themselves (see also Vasalou et al., 2008).

However, previous studies on internet usage have found a gender imbalance in certain activities such as online gaming. McQuivey (2001) noticed that video or computer games have regularly been depicted as a male-dominated activity, yet the recent rise of female gamers would seem to show a change. Williams et al. (2009) believes that females may not consider gaming to be an attractive pastime. Taking part in gaming shows deviation from traditional gender activities and roles. Also, Kidder (2002) noticed that different genders have different behaviors in the cyberworld. Her study found that online female gamers are supposed to be rather caring and nurturing with traits such as empathy and altruism and goals such as preserving relationships while men are believed to be “heroic” and portray competitiveness, aggressiveness, and ambition (Kidder, 2002, p. 630). These findings, in fact, demonstrate an extension of the existing gender roles and expectations in cyberspace.

Even though one survey found that female gamers players account for 40% of all actual players (not specifically computer games) and adult female gamers make up more of the gaming demographic than teenage males (Entertainment Software Association, 2008), this research indicates that both genders consider computer gaming to be a “particularly masculine pursuit” (Selwyn, 2007, p. 533). Williams et al. (2009, p. 3) argues that “in games, gender has again been employed as a basic demographic control, rather than as a dynamic element that shapes how
players approach games, interact within them, and negotiate expectations”. Past studies did use gender as a control variable and concluded that it has affected many outcomes including skill (Brown, Hall, & Holtzer, 1997), aggression (Sherry, 2001), game content (Graner, 2004; Kafai, 1999) and game preference (Sheldon, 2004). However, previous studies of sexual relations among gamers have been minimal (Ogletree & Drake, 2007). Some recent studies also have inspected the social aspects of gendered game play. For instance, females of all ages that partake in online games commonly believe this area is a valuable way of socializing with family and friends and even developing new virtual networks of friends met online (Royse et al., 2007; Yee, 2006). In sum, previous studies show that gaming among men and women differs in performance, perception and choice/type of games (Blumberg & Sokol, 2004). There is limited research on online gaming relationships in changing material gender definitions.

### 2.3.3 Gender Relationships in China

While Chinese society has undergone rapid economic, social and cultural transformation in the past decades, gender relations have also experienced dramatic changes. Chinese society is historically shaped by Confucianism and gender relations were guided by the discourse of “zhong nan qingnu” (give importance to men and look down upon women) (Thakur, 2006, p. 4455), which emphasized men were superior and the woman were inferior. The concept of yin-yang also addresses the difference between men and women. Even though the concepts of yin and yang are complementary, they are not equal (Hooper, 1975). Women were always viewed to be subordinate to men (Gao, 2003). Practices such as foot-binding were introduced to control the movement of women, and polygamy was an accepted custom in ancient Chinese society.
Women’s role was based on the “three obediences and the four virtues” (Gao, 2003; Hooper, 1975) and this ideology has carried on for centuries until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

As a part of the anti-imperialist, anti-Confucian, nationalist, and intellectual movements, the Reform Movement in the mid-1890s and the New Cultural Movement of the May Fourth Era (1915-1925) initiated public discussion on gender equity—in particular, the role of women in the new China. The introduction of western ideologies such as socialism, feminism, and Marxism challenged the dominant Confucian ideology and played a key role in the development of the new socio-cultural environment of China (Chow et al., 2004).

During the Cultural Revolution, gender equality had become an important ideology. The slogan “Women Hold Up Half the Sky” and images of the women from the Dazhai oil fields were used to recognize women’s role and contribution in the communist society (Thakur, 2006, p. 4459). This revolutionary concept not only challenged the traditional setting of gender relations but also played an important part in constructing the conception of “New China” (Hooper, 1975).

The status of women has changed dramatically in the past three decades. The economic growth in mainland China put more women to work and the one-child policy also created a generation of “little empresses” (in addition to “little emperors”) (Jing, 2000). However, the changing political ideology on gender might not change the entire cultural perception on gender relations and gender differences. For instance, the desire for “white skin” as well as the label of

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2 The Three Obediences require women to obey the father before marriage, obey the husband after marriage, and obey the first son after the death of the husband. The Four Virtues are (sexual) morality, proper speech, modest manner, and diligent work (Gao, 2003, p. 116).
“bai, fu, mei” (white, wealth, and beauty) are some of the newly developed “standards” for females in contemporary China.

As one of the fastest-growing economies in the twenty-first century, China has experienced dramatic economic, social, cultural, technological and political changes in the past few decades. How these changes affect conventional cultural constructs such as family, gender, values and belief systems is an ongoing question for academics, practitioners, and policymakers. In this study, I aim to address the interrelationship between technology (online gaming), social structure (gender, social class) and identity (in-group and out-group as well as national) and to explore the opportunities and tensions among these interacting constructs.
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Ethnographic Approach

The fast-growing Chinese online gaming community is creating tremendous business opportunities for online game manufacturers and marketers; issues related to consumer emotions, attitudes and values over online game-related activities require further investigation (China Internet Information Center, 2007). I employed an ethnographic approach in which is method of naturalistic inquiry containing a particular interest in culture (Sarantakos, 1993) within this thesis. The purpose and advantage in this kind of research approach is to develop a holistic understanding of the world from the eyes of the cultural members studied (Barnes, 1996), as well as recording the complex social interactions surrounding them (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994). In my case, I performed an examination the re-construction of identity and gender in online gaming communities as well as study how social relationships among gamers, their families and peers are affected by this new entertainment and social activity. Some limitations associated with this method include time requirement, safety, invasion of privacy, the interviewer effect (as an outsider, the informants would want to present themselves in a good light).

To better understand the interactions between members of the online game community and their social networks, I immersed myself into the online gaming community through participating in social activities and attending different gaming events. Such participation in the online game community allows me to explore the paradoxical rhetoric of online gaming and better experience how consumer communities are structured in the Chinese online gaming market (Kozinets, 2002; O’Guinn & Belk, 1989).
3.2 Research Objectives and Research Questions

My research is an introspective study of online gamers in mainland China during the summer of 2014. The goal of this study is to understand how Chinese youth re-construct gender and identity in the online gaming community. This ethnographic study aims to establish insights into discursive acts and identification practices through engaging with informants and enacting the nature of the social relationships on display and the discourse of networks in the virtual realm arbitrating those relationships (Croft, 2013).

To address the complexity of the online game community and to identify the interrelationship of online games and their cultural and commercial impacts, I framed my research questions around the goal of acquiring an understanding in the connections among gender, identity and consumption. I viewed the online game community as a reflection of the socio-cultural environment among the youth generation in mainland China. Through studying the changes and the impact of online games, a commodity that obsesses Chinese youth, I intend to unpack the dialectic relationship between China’s youth gender relationships, identity formation and consumerism.

3.3 Fieldsite - Online Gaming in Shanghai, Mainland China

This research was conducted in Shanghai, mainland China from June to August 2014. Shanghai was chosen as the field site of this research because the city is the consumption center of China. Many well-educated and wealthy young consumers reside in the city. Shanghai is the ideal place to conduct this ethnographic research as it was the birthplace of China's online
gaming industry, which has grown steadily over the years (China Daily, 2014). The deputy director general of the Shanghai Press and Publication Administration, Junbo Zhu, stated that there are over 200 new games developed every year in Shanghai. The city keeps attracting new online game developers because of the market size (output value of over $4 billion USD, 30% of China’s total) as well as the well-established industry infrastructure (China Daily, 2014).

3.3.1 Social-Historical Development of Online Gaming in Mainland China

There are three major timeframes that must be considered in order to capture the historical development of online gaming in China. The first era was dated between 2000 and 2002. Chinese game developers were imitating, and sometimes copying, Korean-developed online games introduced to the Chinese market. The second era, 2002-2007, was boosted by locally developed games. These locally developed games had a strong influence on the gaming culture and proved to be the foundation of online gaming in China (Chung & Yuan, 2011). The third and latest era began in 2008, when giant game developers such as Blizzard Entertainment entered the Chinese market. There is increasing number of games targeting female gamers in this current market.

Thanks to the influence of China’s communist party, foreign companies are facing difficulties in entering the Chinese market due to the hindrances of various government policies. The industry giants of China therefore decided to invest in foreign gaming giants and develop their own servers to bring those games to China. In 2008, the North American gaming giant Riot Games became a subsidiary of Tencent Holdings. Mark Ren, the CEO of Tencent, once said, “(w)e are excited to link deal and bring League of Legends to the Chinese market. With the
passionate creative talent behind one of the most popular mods of all time that is extremely popular in China, *League of Legends* is sure to capture the attention of a Chinese gaming audience” (Weir & Sunar, 2008). Industry analysts believe that the future growth of the online gaming industry in China will shift to other modes of gaming such as mobile and e-sports professional gaming tournaments (Hanson, 2015).

### 3.4 Data Collection Procedure

The study was carried out to examine common themes of youth identity, gender relationship, and online game consumption in diverse localities of Shanghai such as university campus and dorms, gaming cafes, restaurants, etc. This research sought to identify discourses of material consumption, identity, and gender issues in order to analyze the impact of the Chinese youth culture and gaming industry. This study examined the lived experience of the informants using an existential-phenomenological approach (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989). The existential-phenomenological approach has been employed in examining experiences of learning and special possessions (Colaizzi, 1973; Giorgi, 1970; Myers, 1985). In my study, I intended to examine experiences of virtual goods consumption, identity formation and transformation, representation of gender and gender relationships, and the re-structuring of society and community in the context of online gaming among the Chinese youth.
3.4.1 In-Depth Interviews

In-depth interviews were the primarily data-collection method used in this research. To have a better understanding of the online gamers’ everyday lives and gaming experience, 20 in-depth interviews were conducted in the city of Shanghai. These interviews took place in gaming cafés, university dormitories, informants’ homes, libraries, and other venues. Each interview was audio-taped and ranged from 45 minutes to an hour in length. The interview period began with some “grand tour” questions (McCracken, 1988) about participants’ personal backgrounds and then focused upon their experiences of online gaming. Questions related to the definition of youth identity and their relationships with others around them, their thoughts upon gender relationship as well as masculinity and femininity ideals in online gaming, and their viewpoints on bonding/teamwork were asked. Professional gamers and gamers’ life goals, along with virtual consumption beliefs, were also part of the discussion (see interview guide Appendix A).

The majority of informants were male gamers (except for one) between 20 to 34 years of age, and their occupation ranged from university students to fresh graduates. Some of them had been working for a few years in Shanghai. A summary of the characteristics of the informants is provided in Table 3.1. To compensate them for their time and consideration, each informant had the choice of receiving RMB50 or virtual game merchandise of similar/equal value. I had great pleasure in exploring each individual’s personality and experiences in online gaming. It was rather difficult to get informants as many individuals came from middle- to high-income families; thus an hour of their time might be valued at more than 50RMB. Some other difficulties that I encountered included the disturbance in noise of others at the venues where my recordings took place. Also, the development of connection was also required prior or after the interviews.
seen through meals or gaming time together. However, I am grateful as the majority of informants were kind and helpful in the interview process. When portraying female online gamers, it is primarily about the perceptions of online male gamers of women. I do not have enough data gathered from online female gamers.

Table 3.1 Descriptions of Research Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Role in the Gaming Community</th>
<th>Years in Gaming Community</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liao Rao (Close Childhood Friend and Key Informant)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Graduate Student</td>
<td>Gamer</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jiao Zhu</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Undergraduate Student</td>
<td>Gamer</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sui Ku</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Banker</td>
<td>Gamer</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miao Miao</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Girlfriend of Gamer</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shu Shao</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Undergraduate Student</td>
<td>Gamer</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chen Hong</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>Gamer</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shen Shen</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Hotel Management</td>
<td>Friend of Gamer (Light/Social Gamer)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xu Rong</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Graduate Student</td>
<td>Gamer</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tang Yao</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>Friend of Gamer (Light/Social Gamer)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tan Tao</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Entrepreneur</td>
<td>Gamer</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xiu Lo</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Secretary</td>
<td>Gamer</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lu Lou</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Official Assistant</td>
<td>Gamer</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chen Shao</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Administrative Assistant</td>
<td>Gamer</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### 3.4.2 Participant Observation

Participant observation took place with gamers in 4 gaming cafés (Changning, Jing’an, Xuhui and Pudong districts of Shanghai) as well as the China Joy Digital Entertainment Exposition. 3 out of the 4 gaming cafés were part of the famous Wang Yu Wang Ka internet café chain. I was able to compete and learn various new games with my informants. At other times, I watched them compete with others online or against each other in gaming cafés. There are various types of internet cafés, from low- to high-class, similar to motels and hotels, without the star ratings. We made jokes and even had a few outings together over lunch/dinner. Most of the time, my informants would partake in gaming together in internet cafés (Image 1). Field notes and researcher’s journal entries such as a reflection of the events and my feelings that occurred

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**Table 3.2 Descriptions of Research Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Role of Gamer</th>
<th>Additional Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liu Jei</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Military</td>
<td>Parent of Gamer/Gamer</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yao Juan</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Government Intern</td>
<td>Gamer</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jing Chen</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Realtor</td>
<td>Gamer</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ming Hao</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Works for family business</td>
<td>Gamer</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Da He</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Automotive sales</td>
<td>Gamer</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hen Jing</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Administrative clerk at a fashion firm</td>
<td>Gamer</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kurtis Leng</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Professional Gamer</td>
<td>Professional Gamer – Support Role of Evil Genius Team</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
that particular day. Categories of themes emerged naturally during these spontaneous social interactions.

Illustration 3. 1: The Interior of an Internet Café in Shanghai

Internet cafés are common in Shanghai. Middle- to high-end internet cafés usually offer clean and smoke-free environments and provide various perks for memberships along with food and drinks. Places were divided into various sections including couples (alone time) sections,
group gaming in particular rooms, and other options, as the prices vary and this franchise is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Illustration 3. 2: Couples Area of Internet Café

Due to the relatively higher prices (10 RMB an hour), the customers are usually from middle- or upper-middle-class families. While online games were long perceived as male-
dominated entertainment, I was surprised by the number (about 25%) of females were in these internet cafes.

Even though I spent most of my time at the middle- to high-end internet cafes for my field observation (as my key informant and his friends were mostly of mid-higher social class), I had a chance to visit a lower-class gaming café. The café was filled with dirty and poorly maintained computers. It had a smoky and noisy environment as gamers were yelling and arguing most of the time. The security level was rather low and a fight broke out during my visit. In summary, the personality of individuals appears to resemble, in some ways, their gaming experience in the gaming cafés.

In addition to observing gaming behaviour in gaming cafés, I had many opportunities to observe gaming activities in at-home settings. I noticed that many of my informants using the software YY (www.yy.com), a widely accepted voice-chat system in the gaming world of China, to communicate with others during gameplay. My informants created different groups for specific gaming times and activities.

### 3.4.2.1 China Joy Digital Entertainment Expo and Conference

Due to the growing population of online game developers in Shanghai, a number of events and conventions were introduced to the city to attract both local Chinese and international consumers and market agents (Takahashi, 2014b). To get a better understanding of how the online game industry operated, I attended one of the world’s largest gaming expos, China Joy, in summer 2014. This event had attracted an estimated 250,000 attendees to a sprawling complex of 100,000 square meters—the Shanghai New International Exhibition Centre space in Pudong,
Shanghai. According to the organizer, this event was about five times larger than the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) in the United States.

The atmosphere was extremely busy, noisy, and crowded during the hot summer in Shanghai. Due to the number of attendees, many were pushing and shoving to get around and the queues to different venues and booths were extremely long. Particularly at booths where game-related content could be purchased, with complimentary virtual items, guests waited hours in line, much as they would when Apple releases new iPhones. There were various gaming company booths that showcased their games on large screens along with showgirls and cosplayers. The gamers were rather more enthusiastic about purchases than about visiting the various booths, but nonetheless the whole expo was crowded. Gamer interactions with game marketers and developers were almost nonexistent at well-known gaming companies, while start-ups allowed attendees to ask questions and showcased the companies’ latest products. This was mostly in another, less crowded building at the exposition. Gamers were aggressively there to take pictures with and of female models and professional e-sport players. Some sat on the ground to watch professional players play on the big screen. Overall, the experience was unique in furthering knowledge of the Chinese gaming industry and its players. By visiting this major event, I learned that this was a gathering arena for gamers to come out and enjoy the sexualized atmosphere with close friends and meet famous gamers away from the norms of societal constraints. This was rather different than the western networking events such as the yearly Comic Con in San Diego or Electronic Entertainment Expo in Los Angeles.
3.5 Data Analysis

Consumption patterns and identity narratives of individual informants were examined through qualitative data analysis. I took pictures in gaming cafés and China Joy helped me to recall the scenes of the fieldwork. Each interview was reviewed and translated in verbatim transcription from Chinese to English by the researcher. The analysis involved an iterative process in the development and coding of the main themes. Interviews and archival data (such as news and forums) were listened to and read various times, as well as grouped into categories based on behaviour and engagement in online games. The emerging themes were discussed until the author and key informant were both satisfied that they had achieved sufficient interpretive convergence (Kozinets, 2002). Since each informant has a unique experience in online gaming,
this allowed me to capture the similarities and differences regarding gamer identity and gender relationships in the online gaming community.

The data analysis includes three major steps. First, I categorized postings and interview segments according to the normative influences that were examined: relationships among gamers, friends and family, and market agents. Second, I investigated the formation and dynamicity of the construction of identity and gender among the online game community. I examined informants’ gaming experience and explored how their experiences influenced their consciousness of relationship to others, self-representation, and relationship to the society. Third, I categorized my findings according to individual or communal issues such as how online gamers re-define the notions of youth culture and gender ideals. The emergence of themes and affective sentiment in the conversations, participant observations and online blogs was documented.

3.5.1 Coding

Coding of specific time segments throughout the interview was analyzed and recorded in identifying the themes. One of the most common codes that arose was bonding/friendship as a crucial part of the informant’s gaming experience and dedication. Gaming is one of the few ways young Chinese males can share and spend time together as face-to-face interaction are often not feasible because of geographic limitations and conflicting personal schedules. The informants were divided into various demographics including social gamers, hardcore gamers and professional gamers. Themes related to informants’ perceptions on gender, identity and relationships as well as family, education systems and government were coded following Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) coding strategies.
3.5.2 Data Triangulation and Member Check

Codes and themes that emerged from the in-depth interviews were constantly compared with other data sources such as participant observations and archival data of blogs/forums in order to develop a holistic understanding of the dynamicity of online game culture in mainland China. To ensure the accuracy of the representation of gamers, I have shared various themes with my key informant, Rao (M, 23), as a form of member check. Since he spent his entire life in Shanghai, he understand what is going on within the local community and culture. Rao has agreed with my descriptions and interpretations as an appropriate and accurate reflection of the gamers in China from his upper-middle-class online-gamer perspective. He also helped me introduce and collect information from informants with first-hand knowledge of the gaming industry/community.

3.5.3 Challenges

Finding a particular quiet place for interviews was always a challenge in a busy cosmopolitan city like Shanghai. Fortunately, I had the opportunity to conduct some of my interviews at my informants’ homes and dormitories. Informants’ time commitment was also a challenge as most of the gamers in Shanghai were living busy lives and it was hard to get them interested in an hour-long interview. However, the 20 informants in this research present a somewhat mix of voices from gamers (16), light/social gamers (2) and non-gamers (2).

Even though I tried, however it was rather difficult interviewing participants at the China Joy gaming exposition since most of the participants were busy getting to their favourite booths
or stages and the venue was packed with participants. My participant observation, therefore, provides value experience to better understand the gamer behaviours and activities in major events like China Joy. Finally, access to the lower-end gamers was difficult in Shanghai. The demographics of the informants obtained were mostly from the middle and high social strata. The data collected mostly reflects gamers from the middle or upper middle class in Shanghai in which is a limitation of this study.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

4.1 Role of Online Games in Chinese Youth’s Everyday Life

Why is online gaming so attractive to Chinese youth, and what is the role of online games in their everyday lives? My findings add value to the existing literature by showing that gamers view online games as a platform to release the stress of everyday life and to achieve satisfaction through both the actual gaming and the social interaction related to the gaming activities. Also, online gaming allows gamers, especially young ones, to experience a sense of control and empowerment in the highly hierarchical and competitive society of mainland China. For many gamers, online games are not only games or a form of entertainment but also lived experiences that shape the present and the future of the self.

One of my informants, Rong (M, 23), expressed his view of online gaming and its role in his life: “life is filled with experiences, good or bad; it is what shapes one’s current being with the others around…..” His statement shows that online gaming has become an indispensable part of his everyday life. At the same time, online gaming has become an important cultural system that shapes that life. For many Chinese young adults, online games and other online activities such as blogging, social media, and instant messaging (e.g. WeChat) have become the primary channel for communication and social activities.

My findings show that a sense of control and empowerment is always desired among the Chinese youth since many of the young generation still live with their parents. According to my informants, parents in China determine what their children wear, what kind of hairstyles their children are allowed to have, and what extracurricular activities their children attend. Obedience to one’s parents is expected in Chinese society in general. This parallels to Confucianism’s filial piety in social identification for the respect of elders (Hwang, 1999).
Rao (M, 23), for instance, believes that his parents have controlled his entire life, right up to his present situation in college, by means such as hiding computer accessories, limiting his playing time, or not giving him pocket money to hang out with friends. Rao found that online gaming empowered him in many ways, from controlling the action of the game characters to making his own profile to creating his own social network:

“I want to control the aspects of my life from here on. In online games, I can customize my own avatar’s skin that makes me stand out from the rest. Unless my computer or internet [is] down, my hero in the game will always obey me; it is a matter of how I control to win.”

Rao’s narrative shows a typical mindset of the young generation, of whom many believe online gaming provides a space to escape from parents and a way to gain a sense of control and empowerment. Rao displays his enthusiasm in online gaming through the ability to carry out his own choices. Like many of my informants, Rao desires to feel that he is now in the driver’s seat and are independent of their parents or other forms of institutional control. Controlling online game characters and various avatars in the virtual world develops a temporary form of empowerment in which online gamers exert total control of their “lives” and activities, beyond the influence of the parents and societal factors by which they are controlled in the real world.

Avatars or online gaming characters have become a “skin” or extended self (Belk, 2013) for the gamers. The contradiction between the self in the actual life and the self in the virtual world shows the dilemma of the young generation. While institutional and parental controls
determine their everyday activities in the actual world, online gamers use the games to experience freedom and control in this virtual or liminal space (Van Gennep, 1960).

For many gamers, avatars and in-game characters are always loyal and fully obedient to the player in control. This is critical to the youth since their role has shifted from controlled to controller. Online games, in this sense, can be a complementary force, allowing the young generation to gain control in this ever-controlling culture. Even so, some have reported that during gameplay, another kind of stress, intertwined with excitement, may arise. The following sections present key themes related to online gamers’ identity project and the formation of online community.

4.1.1 The Development of “Gamer” Identity

The concept of “gamer” is polysemous. My findings show that the term “gamer” as an identity refers not only to the excitement of a particular leisure activity or hedonic consumption (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982) but also to one’s self-conception and group bonding/affiliation (Scimeca, 2014). For gamers or the “in-groups”, this identity was to a group of passionate, fun-loving consumers. For the out-groups, the label has become intertwined with addiction. There seems to be promotion of misogynistic, discriminatory, and immature identity values, especially in the eyes of the older generation or conservative citizens in mainland China.

My findings from field work of in-depth interviews and participant observation derived three main types of gamers based on their engagement and skill level (Table 1). The “social gamers” viewed online games as a form of leisure or social activity. They would only spend minimal time and money on playing online games as they have other social activities in their
everyday lives. The “hardcore gamers”, in contrast, would spend tremendous amounts of time and money on playing online games. Instead of playing simple and less time-consuming mobile games or less complicated individual games, hardcore gamers usually engaged themselves in massively multi-player role-playing games (MMPRPGs) on the internet. For hardcore gamers, online gaming is central to their lives. Many of my informants spent hours in playing online games and refused to leave their rooms or computers.

Table 4. 1 Types of Online Gamers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Gamer</th>
<th>Hardcore Gamer</th>
<th>Professional Gamer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Leisure / Fun / Spare time</td>
<td>• High Competition – Strict goal of winning</td>
<td>• Male Dominated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Significant Female Population; 26%</td>
<td>• Less tournament play</td>
<td>• Full time job – building skills and competence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Minimal Spending on Virtual Goods</td>
<td>• Always talking about gaming everywhere 24/7</td>
<td>• Mainly partaking in tournaments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Often would not play alone, usually with friends</td>
<td>• Would spend time watching professional gamers and learning</td>
<td>• Steady income with tournament bonuses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sometimes plays after work/school and on weekends</td>
<td>• High monetary spending on virtual goods</td>
<td>• Rarely play with friends, mainly with co-workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Relaxed with calm temper</td>
<td>• Male Dominated</td>
<td>• High pressure, high fame/popularity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• High School / University</td>
<td>• Diverse Age &lt; 30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hardcore gamers invest a significant portion of their disposable income (or pocket money from their parents) on virtual items. One reason is to improve their gaming performance and experience. The other reason is to highlight their “hardcore gamer” identity and find their position in the gamer hierarchy.

Virtual possessions such as weapons or outfits for avatars/gaming characters are important objects used to construct the gamer self in the online game community. While most popular online games in mainland China demand time, skill, and practice, the purchase of virtual
items is an important component in the world of gaming since the virtual items not only improve the skin, outfit, or looks of in-game characters, but also enhance in-game experience since items such as virtual weapons would greatly increase the power of the gaming characters, thus increasing the likelihood of winning.

The craze for virtual items can be viewed as a reflection of contemporary Chinese consumer society in which virtual items can be parallel to the consumption of luxury brands as well as the desire for beauty or fashion. For gamers, virtual items are symbols of wealth and success. This competitive aspect in online gaming reflects the expectation of moving up the social ladder and the competitive nature of the Chinese society. Also, the consumption of virtual items may not aim to show one’s unique identity but to demonstrate one’s in-group status. Individuals want to fit into the group by playing games together, sharing gaming experiences, purchasing virtual items to increase the team’s competitiveness in the games. This is crucial in the collectivist culture of China.

Among all types of gamers, “professional gamer” is definitely the most desirable identity label. The “professional gamers” are individuals who view online gaming as their career. They have spent hours to train themselves, becoming competitive gamers in tournaments. They see their teammates as coworkers instead of friends, and the primary goal is to form a competitive team and win the tournament. As with traditional sports teams, player trades are very common in the professional gamer community. Teams are sometimes sponsored by brands or game manufacturers, and members receive a salary as they prepare for a tournament. One third of my informants dreamed of becoming professional gamers one day. One of my informants, Zhu (M, 20), told me his dream is one day to play on the big stage with the fans shouting and cheering his name. Due to his numerous years of experience and his skill level, he is currently on the verge of
becoming a professional broadcaster of smaller tournaments, which is rather intriguing. However, online gamers notice the differences between professional gamers and amateur or social gamers. For professional gamers, the expectations and requirements are very different from those of amateur gamers. Playing online games may be fun and interesting, but when there is a constant requirement for individuals to play eight-plus hours a day, five days a week, full time, the majority of my informants would back off from the challenge.

Since the players of professional online games (a form of electronic sport—organized competitive multiplayer gaming) are now recognized as professional athletes (Tassi, 2013), media in China frequently portray online games with excitement and the experience of virtual reality. The media portrays the identity of online gamers through fame and achievements. Similar to sport and movie stars, online gaming celebrities gain popularity and recognition quickly. Video interviews are often conducted by commentators and paid by sponsors and gaming companies, and fan bases for certain players may quickly emerge.

Even though the compensation (or salary) is not particularly high, endorsements from various companies can be enticing. Below the level of professional gaming, there is a portion of gamers that are considered semi-professional. These gamers have the potential to become professional; however, the likelihood of this is rather low. Juan (M, 23) analogized the comparison/competition among semi-professional guilds and clans to one’s actual job in society. ‘For these professional gamers, eight hours a day, five days a week (sometimes even more) is simply practicing and gaming together and they love it, and sometimes real money is even directly deposited into their checking accounts.’ Contracts are signed; individuals are paid in real or virtual currency; poor performance equals unemployment and excellent performance results in advancement. At the time Juan was involved, he experienced the ins and outs of the professional
gaming world. Many complex issues such as backstabbing can occur among teammates, and money is often an issue. The legal rules of online gaming companies are strictly set while in professional gaming (E-sports), legal restrictions remain vague. Whether done for outward rewards or out of an inner desire, whether among professionals or amateurs, competition will always persist within the gaming realm if the industry is to survive and further thrive.

Lung (M, 21) is a professional gamer and has recently won over 6 million dollars with his team at an international gaming tournament. During the interview, Lung said, “I treat professional gaming as my job and my teammates are as coworkers. We do spend a lot of time together practicing but there is really not much of a sense of brotherhood. Similar to sports, your team may be switched in the next month. Based on how you play at a certain point, you will just know professional gaming is right for you. It is definitely not for everyone, as millions of players wanting to go pro and only a hundred or so actually make it, there is a lot of dedication.”

In summary, the “gamer” identity is a key contributor to the “Chinese youth” identity dilemma. These young players believe they are able to create a new label and new meaning for the Chinese identity. The gamer identity allows them to differentiate themselves from the older generation and from traditional Chinese culture. Online gaming, therefore, has become a place where the youth can freely form bonds without the distractions and limitations imposed by the rest of society. My informants expressed that a true “gamer” engages himself/herself in various parts of the gaming community. This includes and is not limited to actively participating in game-related events and online social activities. Gamers differentiate their group membership through their choice of fan-base attire (Kozinets, 2001, 2002) and their level of virtual consumption.
4.1.2 Social Stigma of Gamers

In China, online games are always considered hedonic products. My findings show that online gamers experience different forms of social stereotypes and societal pressures in their everyday lives. The young generation in mainland China has called into question the meaning of the term “gamer”. During my fieldwork in Shanghai, the term “gamer” was always intertwined with the notions of addiction and contagion. For instance, Ku (M, 24), an entry-level banker, was discriminated against by his classmates’ parents when he was in high school because of his gamer status. He recalled that his classmates’ parents always used him as an example to warn their kids by saying: “Don’t play as many games as he does”. Ku further noted, “From what is said there, I just feel somewhat saddened by how the older generation views gamers and especially those who often visit gaming cafés. We are not bad people like those that smoke, and even a few druggies, some have a nice heart.” In China, online gamers are stereotyped as pulling all-nighters at internet cafés on weekends, people who have unhealthy lifestyles and have poor relationships with family.

Ku’s experience shows that online gamers in mainland China experience different forms of social stigma. These negative labels are widespread within society. The concept of the individual gamer identity at times can be rather complex for an individual. The gamer enacts multiple identities daily, such as the son or the daughter of their parents, or a student in their high school. However, with more gaming time spent, the “gamer” identity may slowly start to outweigh other identities. In time, other identities may diminish when online gaming engulfs their mindset, which can definitely lead to addiction.
Among all the stereotypical labels, the term “zhai nan” (“Geek Gamers” or literally translated as “stay-home male”) is widely used to describe the online gamers in China. The magnitude of time spent on gaming needs to decrease as these individuals may often be viewed as weak, timid and shy. In contrast with Chinese culture and its attitude toward gamers, the West, with its affordable access to many forms of entertainment, has developed a rather liberal and less competitive online gaming culture, viewing online gaming as a source of enjoyment rather than a process leading to obsession. On a different note, many informants believed one advantage of having the “zhai nan” status is in the unlikelihood of excessive consumption of alcohol and attending nightclubs. They believe these social aspects have compensations in the form of virtual empowerment. Tao (M, 25) tells me that it is a matter of choice that results from various factors such as social wealth, parents/friends, personality, etc. that leads to the desired form in the empowerment of social gatherings and entertainment. Like hotels, gaming cafes also can range in quality of atmosphere, perks, and quality of gaming experience.

4.1.3 The Formation of Gamer Community

In addition to constructing and negotiating their identities in the online and offline settings, forming online communities is another major activity among online gamers in China. The importance of online gaming for an individual grows as friendship and the sense of community evolve. Since many online gamers grew up with the One Child Policy, the lack of similar-age companions within the family forces young Chinese gamers to form different communities or “pseudo-families”. My findings show that online gamers are active in forming different online gaming communities in the virtual world, and many of them viewed these communities as their
“second family”. For instance, Lou (M, 25) described the everyday life of a gamer and his connection to the community:

“My mom and I used to own a small restaurant and I would need to help her during busy hours. However, in the afternoon when it was not busy, I would go on various quests with my tribemates; that was the most exciting part of my day. I had set up my timetable in only playing in the afternoon and sometimes late at night. Occasionally I would “sleepover (all night gaming)” with my tribemates in their apartments or dorms to have “raiding” parties together with delivery fast Chinese food, the most enjoyable era/stage of my life. I did make some money back then in amateur gaming tournaments, but definitely not enough to sustain a living and most of this money I gave to my mom as times were not easy for us”

For Lou, at various times, it may be easier to say “no” to his parent or friend than to a tribemate because individuals have signed up to join, and the responsibility to play and win outweighs peer pressure from friends. The spark for many youth in online games is the involvement with friends and peers, along with meeting new companions in order to carry and carrying out tasks as a team. Individuals often become close to one another through discussion of similar interests and topics; playing the same online game sparks the development of temporary friendship. Each gamer has his/her own strengths/weaknesses and this can be reflected in online gaming communities as well. With different roles, some are the strong front-line attackers while others are supporting cast. Each role must be filled if a team or party is to become successful. Virtual teamwork and community-building may require some sacrifices as not every member can be the frontline player; a team filled with this type is bound to fail. In addition, the role of each
gamer may also reflect or even alter their personality to fit the gaming experience. Constructive criticism among teammates is fairly common as well.

Online gaming has become as omnipresent in the lives of many young males in mainland China. The relatively low prices for games turn almost every consumer into a potential gamer (see also Marchand & Hennig-Thurau, 2013). Game-related news, events such as China Joy Expo, and developments of gaming accessories or related products such as toys and costumes have augmented the gaming experience among the gaming communities. Tao (M, 25), the owner of a website design company, says:

“My friends and I would think about gaming even in our dreams. When we were not playing the game, we would sometimes think of ways on how to improve, the excitement of trying out new aspects of the game and even some ways of making a couple bucks through trends of the in-game market….Undergraduate pressure is quite low here in China compared to high school; this allows us to think more about gaming as opposed to schoolwork. Maybe when we work in the future, we cannot game as much, [so] now is the best time. Even though we can meet new people such as in same classes or through basketball sporting activities, talking about the same online game definitely takes our friendship to the next level.”

The above narrative shows that friendship and excitement were centered in game “talks”. My informants pointed out that the online game platforms and forums provide a “class-free” and comparatively equal space for gamers, which can act as a form of empowerment. Even though gamers sometimes are competing for the possession of virtual items or on advanced levels, their
social class, education, occupation, and family backgrounds are not subject to comparison. Gamers are free to interact and post regardless of their social class. This classless social structure in the online gaming community contradicts the highly hierarchical society in China, in which wealthy Chinese rarely interact with poor due to geographic and social segregation.

One of my informants, Tao (M, 25), believes that the virtual world is a shared space where all participants have the same level of freedom and rights. He observed that the elimination of social stereotypes with an equal platform is actually a way of breaking down the barriers between the rich and poor. Other than the minimal appeals of virtual possessions, it is rather difficult to label the status of another online gamer. Even though it is somewhat more probable that rich users will purchase the most expensive virtual possessions while the poor have the least valuable ones than vice versa, it is by no means certain. Tao told me that he actually had met up in real life with a stranger whom he’d met while gaming online. Tao later realized this friend is extremely rich, which he found quite surprising. It is rather uncommon for gamers to physically meet up since online gamers are usually from different cities within China. However, the urge to meet is strong, especially when the other gamer is female. In Tao’s case, his bond with the rich gamer developed over time (a couple of years) over the internet and as they became close friends, they finally decide to meet face-to-face. Yet they continued playing online games together in gaming cafes. The “gamer” identity therefore signifies a person’s membership in a broader gaming community, and such identification practice also denotes an alignment with the group’s idiosyncrasies, traditions, and social practices (Kowert, 2014).
4.1.4 China Joy: Homecoming for Zhai Nan

Social interactions among online gamers are not limited to the virtual world. For instance, the China Joy Expo in Shanghai is one of the homecoming events for “zhai nan” within China. This event is similar to the annual fandom expo, Comic-Con, in San Diego. Gaming fans lined up for hours during China Joy to purchase gaming merchandise and gear, and many of them were taking photos with showgirls. Similar to Comic-Con, where organizers publicise hashtags (words or phrases preceded by #, to find similar interests) (Jenkins, 2012), participants of China Joy were actively publicised the event through tweets on Weibo; therefore, news of China Joy flooded social media during that particular weekend.

In China Joy, there is a clear distinction between performers and participants. Participants were mainly “zhai nan” gamers, while performers were showgirls connected to gaming companies. Cosplay is not uncommon in the China Joy arena, but it is all about creating a hypersexual outlook of showgirls to entertain the male-dominated “zhai nan” population. Instead of being a networking event like Comic-Con or Mardi Gras in New Orleans, China Joy is more of a consumption event and an exhibition venue for online gamers.

4.2 Gender and Online Gaming

Historically, males have been responsible for most labour-intensive tasks as well as protecting their families and clans. Females were expected to take care of the household and raise the children. Families would value male members more because of their productive power. Females are considered subordinate to their families. As a result, devaluation and lowering of the
social status of females were not uncommon in traditional Chinese society (Arnold & Liu, 1986). Even though the Communist Party emphasizes gender equity, females still face differential treatment in contemporary Chinese society, especially in male-dominated spaces such as online gaming.

Unlike their counterparts in the United States, in which 42% of the online gamers are females, only 27% of gamers in China were female in 2013 (Custer, 2013) and most of the females were engaged in social games instead of complex multiplayer role-playing games. According to my informants, the online game community is a male-dominated space where relationships are strengthened through collaboration, sharing, information exchange and working as a closed group. To compete with other males, the online game community has developed competitiveness through improving their skills, strategically working with teammates, acquiring powerful virtual weapons and demonstrating strong leadership and execution techniques. In other words, the average gamer seeks to develop a masculine representation in the games to convince others that he is a strong teammate.

Many online games emphasize characters or avatars with great physical strength and thus create a masculine gaming environment. The superiority of the male figures and the macho image have become key dominant images in shaping gender norms in contemporary Chinese society. Many of my informants believe that if they were born female, their parents would strictly prohibit their online gaming because the older generation always perceives online games as “a man thing.” For the older generation, typical female leisure activities would be shopping with friends or watching TV dramas, or possibly playing some mobile games. If a young lady want to become a hardcore online gamer, her parents would see this as rather inappropriate. Playing online game seems like a taboo for many Chinese females, especially in internet cafés—
a male-dominated space where males bond and have their “men’s talk”. In other words, online games and internet cafés have become gendered space for Chinese youth.

However, some gamers have different perceptions of females and female gamers in contemporary Chinese society. One of my informants expressed his view of female gamers: “If you are a female and practicing these aspects, other males would view you as quite extraordinary, a rare breed, counter to societal beliefs” (Rong, M, 23). There is a new trend toward wealthy females between the ages of 18 and 30 playing online games. The presence of these female gamers is definitely changing the online community dynamics. Ku (M, 24) feels like this creates a new excitement for males seeing something different in the gaming realm or internet cafés. He says,

“when I notice a few girls playing one particular online game, either online or at gaming cafés, that I play, I have a good feeling in the game’s future growth and potential. Meeting them would definitely be great; however, without common friends, it may be a bit awkward as these girls are definitely something extraordinary”.

In my own observations and experience in the online gaming community, female players tend to play online games mainly for social reasons and with a great virtual outward appeal; this further boosts attraction levels from male players. Some of my male informants expressed their envy of the treatment of females received in the current society. Rao (M, 23), for instance, expressed:

“I rather prefer enacting and living my life as a female in the current Chinese society, especially during this young adult phase. Girls in this current generation have power and control
over young males as this differs vastly from previous generations.” The increasing recognition of females in China is, in fact, changing the gender relationships in that society. Rao’s narrative presents the fact that the imbalance in gender in the online game communities provides more power for females. For instance, the cultural roots in the need to pay for females and with the one child policy, they can easily switch to from one boyfriend to another, as there are “too many fishes in the sea”.

Due to the virtual nature of online gaming, male gamers sometimes exploit this aspect by acting as females online. Some even send fake photos of their female friends as a way to receive special treatment from other gamers. They may also simply want to feel and experience living the identity of a female in the reflection of power and uniqueness within the Chinese society. This shows the vast dimension of the online world and how far Chinese gamers are willing to strive to obtain certain virtual items and benefits. These gamers often are individuals without girlfriends and since they believe girls like to stick with each other, this one way of trying to get closer to real girls even though these males are playing as a female character. However, one of my informants, Chen (M, 25), describes this feeling as:

“… definitely something different and unique. I believe most gamers have tried this with their multiple accounts in their early stages of online gaming. It was very popular and great experience before, but however as more gamers are practicing this and others start realizing you are actually a male, it becomes rather dull/boring.”

As young gamers explore their understanding of females and relationships, this is part of their growing experience. The new social status of female gamers changes the perception of females among the contemporary youth generation. My informants believe that female gamers
are receiving better treatment in the online gaming community because of their gender and as a result, this transgender idea can change the dynamic of gender relationships.

These new perceptions of females create a new set of social issues and new forms of gender discrimination among the Chinese youth. While yet, marketers are still promoting the notion in commoditization of female body within the online game community in an overwhelming male populated society.

4.2.1 Commoditization of Female Bodies

In the online gaming industry, marketers frequently use females to attract and excite male gamers. The way young, attractive females are portrayed in the online game community by Chinese gamers is rather controversial. While online games provide them a platform from which to freely express their opinions, gamers also notice that sometimes in-game expressions can go to an extreme: profane and sexist language, threats, and bullying can all be heard over messages and voice chat. Bullying and harassment are not uncommon in the virtual world, and among all kinds of online discussion, gender-related topics such as female avatar portrayals are popular topics within the online gaming community. Hong (M, 24), for instance, said the “majority of the female characters in online games are sexually portrayed both to entertain the male gamers and redefine the beauty standard for females. This is both seen on artificial intelligence (AI) and female gamers’ avatars”. A new beauty standard is being defined by the appearance of the gaming character or avatar:
“the less the female (game character) wears, the more attractive she looks, with accessories such as stockings and high heels” (Shao, M, 25).

This portrayal could be viewed as a reflection of the stereotype and expectation for young females in contemporary Chinese society. The industry agents further exploit such expectations in their marketing strategies. For market agents, the female body represents a gateway to hyper-sexuality in the minds of Chinese men. Through showcasing of minimal clothing, skin and sound/tone, marketers are able to attract more male gamers. They are promoting an over sexualized notion of women. This keeps male gamers excited and titillated about what they see on line and in real life. The Chinese society has now evolved into a commercialized sexuality in which appearance and money may influence other cultural values such as gender equity and respect.

In the case of China Joy, companies spent tremendous amounts of money to hire female models for the show, along with numerous security guards. This may simply imply that the appeal of female representation in this type of convention is critical. The presence of the security guards also addressed the potential threats to the sexualized female bodies in the male-dominated public space.

The hyper-sexual representation of females in the marketplace also challenges the conventional conceptions of family and gender relationships. For instance, Lou (M, 25) commented that long-lasting relationships are no longer of great cultural importance in affluent cities such as Shanghai and Beijing. Upper-middle-class, attractive young females are being labeled as “bai fu mei” (white, wealthy and pretty) and have also become the ideal image for females in Chinese society. Even though some argue that this is not a sign of degradation, the negative connotations of high expectations and bossy attitudes turn this label into a negative
stigma for affluent females. Informants believe there is a great need for reform; the main question is how to create it.

4.2.2 “Brotherhood” and the Re-Construction of Masculinity

In addition to the new gender perceptions in the online game community, my findings also give insight into the construction of masculinity in online games. While gamers seek to tap into the feeling of hyper-masculinity online by exerting power and dominance over other gamers, they were engaged in activities to reinforce their “brotherhood” by bonding with other males.

While the term “guanxi” has been used widely to describe how business partners maintain their relationships and trust through social networks, the term “brotherhood” has become an extended form of “guanxi” in a male-dominated space. Brotherhood in China is often referred to as “tie ge men” (literally translated as “steel brother men”) and only sometimes may females sever this bond. My informants believe that playing online games together is a way to build trust. My findings show there is a generational difference in relationship-building. The older generation in China tended to develop social ties at the dining table through grand meals. For the younger generation, online gaming and social media (e.g., Weibo, WeChat, etc.) are primary platforms for building relationships and social networks.

Many of my informants believe that in the intrinsically complex society of China, true friends are not made at business tables, but in other social settings. Online gaming started with various domestic games designed to promote courage and the power of the enriched Chinese history and culture. This was the main attraction at the turn of the century as the government was rather pleased with its growth. Since many games in the past were single-player games against an
artificial intelligence, friends would come over to take turns playing, and competition was focused on passing particular levels. My informants believe that the introduction of multiplayer online games changed the whole social dynamic in the gaming community.

Relationships are sometime emphasized through the system of gift-giving (Gold et al., 2002). Joy (2001) describes this instrumental concept through the term *guanxi*. It has a “tactical dimension, although degrees of affect and notions of loyalty, duty, and trust are also involved. *Guanxi* relations develop, by definition, between potential friends; hence a certain amount of etiquette and propriety of conduct are necessary. Gains and losses are calculated, and the balance has to be maintained. Giving and losing face is crucial to this relationship” (p. 250). Gift-giving and *guanxi* has a long history in Chinese culture and the ritual has continued in the emerging online communities. A gamer may show respect toward his friends through gifts of virtual products. There are also signs of mutual benefits and support through guiding friends within the game. According to my informants, these are fairly common practices in developing *guanxi* amongst young adults.

As gaming became a big hit over the past decade, friendship was an aspect that many regarded as a factor that developed as a result, leading to trusting others and self-dignity. However, that was not the case for Tao (M, 25), who is currently a website designer trying to start his own business. He has a computer science degree and also plays online games when he is tired of programming; he hopes for good luck with his start-up and wants to try something different as opposed to finding a job. He explains:

“… usually Chinese gamers do not become obsessed in holding a grudge upon a friend if he performed poorly in a game. It may just be a minor rage of anger at that particular moment. However, for me and probably many others, it becomes very disastrous when someone you don’t
know in the virtual world tries to steal your virtual items that you have spent so much money and effort on. There was an incident that occurred after three years upon meeting an individual friend that I thought I could trust. Due to the fact that I felt there was a strong relationship, I gave him my username and password as a favour since I was planning to go on vacation and could not log online to do certain tasks. When I had come back, I realized he stole all of my precious and valuable items and blocked all means of communication. Those items could be sold in real money for rather high prices, and it feels like being robbed by your neighbour.”

Here, we can definitely see an abuse of relationship as there are both positive and negative sides to online community, as each gamer should be cautious in protecting his or her personal gaming account, similar to real-life banking information and passwords.

4.3 Reconstruction and Transformation of Social Relationships

While people argue that online gaming provides space for connection and community-building, many believe online gaming is also the cause of separations among couples and conflicts among family members. My study has found conflicts are not limited to parents; girlfriends and spouses can also become involved. Rarely would a girl become satisfied with a gamer partner. One girlfriend of my informant, Miao (F, 22) puts this as, “if he is so in love with online games, why does he need me? Just have a relationship with the virtual world; you can fantasize whoever and whenever.”

Many informants have split up with their girlfriends due to online gaming, and this is no surprise. Some were rather open about discussing it while others tried to avoid the topic, possibly due to shame and regret. On a deeper note, Zhu’s (M, 20) parents have actually divorced, with
his father’s addiction to online games as a factor. Jing (M, 24) is in the fashion industry and did not attend university but went to work right out of high school. He believes he is a game addict and says that this fault was very much influenced by his father, much like Zhu. Jing remembers screaming fights during his childhood over his father’s lack of responsibility. His father did have a well-paid job, but other than providing financial support, he immersed himself in video games all day. Jing bonded with his father only through online gaming. His mother could not handle this and soon filed for divorce. Jing’s and Zhu’s cases showed that gamers must consider the severity of online gaming and its effects on others. A damaged relationship may tip the balance in one’s romantic or family life. The gamer often notices this damage too late, since they are in a world of their own.

With the increase in divorces and complex family relationships, Chinese youth are starting to rebel by becoming indifferent to their families and parents. This was rather different in the past, when family values were a key cultural component. My informants with girlfriends struggle to find a balance; as a result, many may end up ending their relationships. Juan (M, 23), an intern at a small government office, explains his daily struggles with his previous girlfriend:

“It is like a dilemma, torn between the relationships with your long-time buddies versus a slim possible chance of a future wife. Much of the time, I am not interested in her hobbies such as travelling, watching drama/movies together or constantly eating luxurious meals, and I would start to get sick of it and her. She always nags when I spend some alone time with my childhood friends gaming. I feel the loss of not only money but control as a man; where is my space?” In the real world, some of the male gamers who have girlfriends may develop negative attitudes towards women as a result through these aspects such as pestering and lavish activities described above.
In the case of online gamers, girlfriends are often neglected, lost or simply indifferent in the lives of young Chinese men as online gaming plays such a great role. Hao (M, 24) says: “A few years back, having a girlfriend was everything, [but] since the rising popularity of online games, it is so hard to choose between one or the other now.” Real world girlfriends are rather different from one’s perception in marketers’ portrayal of lavish virtual female gaming appeals.

Various traditional values are being challenged and reshaped in contemporary Chinese society and some of them may no longer be relevant. This raises the question of whether current society is escaping to or escaping from technology through online gaming. With the abolition of various traditional values in China and the rest of the world due to technological change, the preservation of history and culture may be confined to books and classrooms. My informants believe there is currently no solution in escaping from the societal norm; online gaming is only a respite, and the generation gap occurs as a result. Hao (M, 24) summarized his feelings about the current young generation:

“Due to generational difference in ideals and thoughts, our parents would never understand our perception and love for gaming. It is intricately part of our lives similar to how communism is for them.”
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

5.1 Online Gaming and the Construction of “Chinese Youth” Identity

My findings show that the popularity of online gaming provides a distinctive identity marker for many Chinese youth. The young generation sees online gaming as a form of rebellion to show they are independent from their parents’ control and monitoring. Growing up in cosmopolitan cities like Shanghai and Beijing, the current generation of Chinese youth culture is heavily influenced by brands, technology, and modern lifestyles. For many young adults in China, online games provide a sense of control and empowerment. The absence of parents or older generations in the online gaming community creates a new “youth-only” social space.

Gamers experienced their transformation from childhood to maturity with a sense of independence in online gaming, the freedom of forming their own communities and the responsibility to maintain their relationships with other gamers. Meanwhile, their parents still define success based on academic or career performance—top grades, high examination scores or a well-paid job or professional qualification. In contrast, the young generation gained a sense of empowerment and respect from other gamers. Great gaming skills and the ability to help other gamers are the new definition of success. The traditional Chinese family tends to pressure children for better grades and schooling. When these children reach the university level, the greater freedom to explore various identities often comes into play. This can take place in online gaming, where the external identity and internal sense of self are treated as constructs or working hypotheses, subject to constant reform (Belk, 2013). In congruence with Drenton’s (2013) theme of tension between reliance and autonomy, Chinese youth “feel that adolescence is a period of
rebellion, testing limits of the adults, breaking rules, and enjoying freedom; however, they remain primarily dependent on the adults in their lives for providing structure and creating financial stability” (p. 111). Online gaming, in this case, provides space for Chinese youth to experience freedom and their first taste of the parent-free environment.

Through this study of online gaming culture, my research gives deeper insights into how the “Chinese Youth” identity is constructed and negotiated in contemporary Chinese society. The contemporary Chinese youth culture has been greatly affected by foreign market products, strongly influencing and changing the way the young generation sees the world. The current form of Chinese youth culture can be viewed as a manifestation of the transnational, market-based ideology that is embodied through Wilk (1995)’s dialectic structures of common difference where diversity is organized through objectification of culture. In the current study, the traditional Chinese culture is being contradicted by a more contemporary, individualistic consumer culture. The transformation of Chinese consumer society could be viewed as a form of “glocalization” (Robertson, 1992), the examination of consumerism as a belief and value system in which consumption and acquisition rituals are naturalized as sources of self-identity and meaning in life within a particular cultural setting (Zhao & Belk, 2008).

Chinese parents from a traditional cultural mindset still do emphasize limits on their children’s choice of consumption. Also, peer pressure weighs upon them in the form of comparison of school marks, extracurricular activities such as piano, after-school programs and other activities at a young, controllable age (Chan & McNeal, 2003). Due to China’s massive population and intense competition as well as extreme income disparity (Gan, 2013), many Chinese youth feel rather pessimistic in their future ability to secure an ordinary job to make a living. On the other hand, in the virtual realm, young gamers follow the postmodern trend of
pursuing various identities. In this study, online gaming acts as a means of escape from society. The virtual setting is a liminal dimension that allows for empowerment as this “youth-only” space frees the young generation away from societal pressure and expectations. My research places value on these intergenerational differences where the portrayal of consumption is gradually evolving and changing. For instance, purchases of virtual and intangible goods would be viewed as a valueless and taboo by the older Chinese generations. Identity formation in the past generation may rely simply on differences in social status as a means of positioning, while in the youth context, online gaming is often minimal of social stereotypes and the differences of the rich and poor are not as obvious.

Nevertheless, in the twenty-first century, technological transformation in emerging economies is greatly influenced the mindsets of young consumers. The current study on online gaming digs further into the exhibition and collection of virtual items/avatars and their consumption, in particular, in relation to re-materialization in an online context, resulting in a major portion of Chinese youth consumption and the construction of virtual brand communities. The “online gamer” identity also has an effect on the development of gender and digital/social relationships among various classes that is analyzed through in-game social networking and even gift-giving.

The creation of virtual place could be considered a form of “re-worlding” (Kozinets & Kedzior, 2009). The “re-worlding” practice removes the constraints of our physical matter and space and grants us new abilities. Kozinets and Kedzior (2009) argue that “the ability to remodel the virtual environment extends the identity project far beyond the body. . . Therefore, places in virtual worlds can also be considered to be vivid markers of virtual identity” (p. 12). These new abilities and identities give gamers a sense of control and empowerment that they cannot obtain.
in real society. Unable to grasp this power in real life, gamers have begun to rebel and protest against others such as their parents or institutions in the physical world.

With various online identities, the Chinese youth are beginning to also use digital media to enhance real relationships in the virtual realm. With conservative cultural limits on dating until after high school, both male and female students are using social online games as a form of social media to pursue and get to know one another. Students counter their culture’s limits on personal face-to-face physical interactions by creating identities in the virtual space to explore one another’s true identities. There is a deeper level of communication where gamers actually form bonds and long-term friendships through the gaming process. With this immense experience of lifestyle and this new means of socializing, gamers can develop a sense of empowerment in shaping their youth identity within conservative traditional Chinese culture.

Previous research shows that teenagers make minor distinctions between online and offline, and between the forms of communication unique to each arena. Digital forms of mediation can foster one’s intimate relationships with others by eliminating the awkwardness of face-to-face relationships (Manghani, 2009). My findings provide insight into these identity creations as individuals of the same gender, mostly males, can find a space to bond in both in the physical and virtual realities, knowing that they are in full control over the avatars and in-game characters. This creates a sense of escapism again, reflecting back onto a society where a young adult’s social power is very limited. In addition to communication through technology, playing video games with friends, either physically together or online, is increasingly a form of courtship (Molesworth, Jenkins, & Eccles, 2011).
In the confined Chinese society, from childhood on, an individual’s presentation of self is often ignored and being unique goes very much against the collectivistic culture. Wearing literal and metaphorical uniforms from elementary to high school reduces the possibility of any reworking of one’s own identity. Freedom of speech was also believed nonexistent; traditional families and the central system will simply abolish any form of dissent. Even though Chinese society has evolved dramatically since the 1990s, the core concepts of rebellion and freedom of speech are confined and limited. The current technological age allows Chinese youth to interact with one another through virtual platforms. These virtual experiences and representations are observed in almost every corner of life: business, learning, dating, entertainment, even sexual relationships (Blascovich, 2002). These are areas in which further enhanced young gamers’ quest to find their own real and virtual identities.

In the heart of the gamer, virtual roles and items may even outweigh the possible real-life identities and many tangible possessions due to the burden of routine. Gaming is omnipresent in the lives of youth gamers. Past studies show that one's possessions in the digital world may have a major influence upon one’s purchase behavior and identity (Belk, 2013). Identities are interplayed without limit, particularly through online games such as the Sims and Second Life. As mentioned earlier, gamers are characterized by avatars, which intermingle through chat technologies within the virtual world (Rice, 2006).

An individual may be deprived of various real-world roles, but no such deprivation exists online. Individual space in online gaming communities represents a consumer narrative where multiple selves are made comprehensible (Arnould & Price, 2000). The outcome goals of meeting certain standards of various online identities are interesting and self-enhancing for Chinese young adults. Usually products, brands, and services in general will have different kinds
of value (Kotler, 2000). In the real world, consumers are able to experience the use value as well as the symbolic value of a certain brand image. Unlike Schau and Gilly’s (2003) claim that web spaces provide no truly functional value, that beyond the access technology the overriding value is semiotic, my study found that functional value does exist in the cloud realm. Our attention to digital possessions also shapes the nature of our public interactions with others (Belk, 2013). For instance, an individual can purchase certain gifts to give others as a symbolic way of representing their relationship. Gamers can represent this feeling of social status in the display of virtual goods as a functional appeal, a kind of self-representation to others in the virtual world. Furthermore, goods in the virtual world do not take up physical space, nor do they decay. This is a reflection of how the youth are expressing individuality even in the face of tension between uniqueness and conformity. These gamers grapple with who they are and how they are perceived by others within the community. Displaying unique virtual accessories is a far cry from the young gamer’s struggle in discovering his own unique path while conforming to social norms and expectations in the liminal stage of adolescence (Drenton, 2013). And once a gamer is comfortable playing with and purchasing these virtual goods, why not learn how to code and design them?

In sum, youth identity performs as a structure of common difference to aid the development of both individualized and collective discourses of identity. This is interplayed within the gamer’s bond with others in the formation of the collective fandom culture (Cova & Pace, 2006; Kozinets, 2001) while yet wanting to stay unique and stand out within the community via the display of various virtual goods. The contemporary social theory argues that identity has become greatly reflexive and individualized (e.g., Kjeldgaard & Askegaard, 2006). This is clarified by the new time-space configurations of late modernity (Giddens, 1991), the rise
of a global consumer society (Bauman 1998), and the disbanding of traditional modern social categories such as class (Beck 1992). My findings show that in late technological modern times, young online gamers are taking up these symbolic consumption practices within their liminal stage between childhood and adulthood. These particular market-mediated products are reflections of the emerging self-concept (Drenton, 2013) closely associated with successful manhood (e.g. gold-plated and muscular avatars). Gamers observe a new level of realism in online games where the use of live motion-capture to replicate the particular movements of real players and their avatars creates an unprecedented sense of control. It gives the player the sense that they’re really on the court or battlefield, playing their favourite hero or character (Huntmann, 2002).

5.1.1 The “Zhai Nan” Generation

The way online gamers are presented among friends may actually be vastly different than their self-representation toward family members and society. Generally, the youth agreed that spending tremendous amounts of time and money in online gaming is unproductive. In North America, youth often reject the gamer identity because they view games as “peripheral to mainstream media culture, a guilty pleasure, a juvenile pastime, and as a medium that is inherently unimportant” (Shaw, 2012, p. 40), The gamer identity, in contrast, is rather acceptable in China since online gaming allows players to converse with one another through the internet. This is a popular alternative means of socialization in China, since the overall society is still rather conservative about meeting strangers. For most young people, socializing in the virtual world is part of their everyday lives.
Too much of this gaming time, however, can be viewed as toxic, leading to negative connotations and stereotypes in China when one is referred to as “zhai nan”. Similar to the Japanese term “otaku” and English term “geek,” the Chinese youth labelled this way are portrayed as having an obsessive interest in online gaming. It may seem like these individuals have their own thoughts and mindsets swayed away from societal matters and simply focus within their own bubble. Previous literature has described geeks or otaku as males interested in video games, anime, and manga—a fascination widely viewed as perverse. Youth look down on otaku as of a lower class or degraded, particularly in their lifestyle and taste, as well as actions that leads to social ostracism. Growing out of otaku and geek culture, the glocalization of beautiful girls (Bishojo) in Hong Kong youth culture was described as “fetishes in manga, video games, and figurines circulate seemingly endlessly at the center of their attention” (Yiu & Chan, 2013, p. 854). Similar to pedophiles and homosexuals, the stereotypical otaku also is surrounded by objects of special desire: they are obsessed with perverse girl images (Azuma, 2009). Slater (as cited in Yiu & Chan, 2013 pg. 857) used the term “moe” to describe an individual who overwhelms the gazer in any cathexis of consumption fetishes to animation, video games, and action figures in general, and any parts of the female body in particular, in order to quench the (predominantly) male’s insatiable desires, a phenomenon that is common in the West.

In sum, my research gives value to the term “zhai nan” in the field of youth online gamers. Even though it is rather derogatory term amongst the youth in China and has some connection to “moe”, it is not the same and not as negative a term as otaku. There are definite elements of bishojo, and attractive images of girls proliferate in zhai nan culture; however, the many hours devoted to online games give this particular term its primary meaning. With that said, from my research, there is a definite negative stereotype attached to the zhai nan label
within youth culture. The challenge is maintaining a balance between one’s involvement with online gaming and the “real world society”.

5.1.2 Online Gaming as Brotherhood: New Form of Family

Family is a basic collective unit in a society. My study on online gaming found that family structures have been re-constructed in both the virtual and real worlds. The clans and teammates in the online game setting are often one’s real friends but enact the roles of virtual family members. Changes in the perception of family and gender relationships as well as the notion of “brotherhood” were some of the emerging themes identified in the context of online gaming and youth culture.

Brotherhood identity is commonly portrayed in fraternity groups participating in events together, especially in university years. Previous research has shown that promoting school bonding in early adolescence may have positive consequences by decreasing consumption of or delaying experimentation with alcohol (Giannotta & Özdemir 2013). One’s school network has a great influence on the choices one makes throughout adolescence. In China, as a result of the one-child policy, schoolmates often take the place of biological siblings. As a boy ages, play behaviour is transferred to online games that may shape the development of masculinity. Due to the growth of social responsibilities, a childhood sense of brotherhood diminishes into a more distant friendship. A decade or two ago, in the physical world, backing up a friend in a fistfight was a sign of masculinity among the brotherhood. However, according to my informants, this has slowly transitioned into the idea of constant participation in activities such as sports and online gaming. As fighting in physical world may have societal consequences, the feeling of
traditional brotherhood has been transferred to online battles and quests through an imagined community. Close network friends inspire a youth's decisions and the value that he or she derives from online games through communicational or behavioral recommendations in China. This can include word of mouth, adaption of the game as a result of brotherhood network effects and also observational learning. Online games have also been thought to influence consumers' personalities as well. This can include stimulating violence in language, reflecting on the society as a whole. This is rather complex and multifaceted (Marchand & Hennig-Thurau, 2013). At the same time, participation in gaming can also influence gamers’ desire to help one another, as observed earlier.

My research highlights the transformation of brotherhood as it was from seen decades ago in physical fistfights to contemporary online games. This new representation of brotherhood displays a form of hyper-masculinity and is interplayed among various imagined communities that operate online, with leaders and members helping out each other even years down the road. This results in the formation of various identities and fandom groups critical to this generation of young males. Online gaming culture acts as a growth process. Collectivism is encouraged on a social level in which citizens belong to community of people. While within this realm, due to the population size of China, the individual is encouraged to be the best amongst competition since childhood. Students and young adults may encounter the lack of ability to handle team oriented tasks such as projects or assignments. The family, educational system and society focuses primarily on the “I” rather than the value of “we” on an individual level.

In response, boys learn teamwork from other boys, in person and online, forming their own “brotherhoods.” As “素质” the morals and ethics of Chinese citizens of the society gradually improved, we can see this transformation from the traditional form of fist-fighting
upon protecting the brotherhood into online battles and quests for an imagined community. The introduction to a new game replicates traditional master-student relationships as experienced gamers teach newcomers the ropes. As players advance through the ranks of a game, they try to stay on par with or slightly better than their friends to maintain and improve guanxi. The concept of guanxi can be further strengthened through the expectation of mutual aid and support. Each gamer’s role within a particular team is very important, as if one fails, all fail. As in sports, this mutual dependence creates a new form of family or clan. My research therefore expands Belk’s (2013) study of digital self-possession and suggests that there is an evolution in gift-giving behavior among young Chinese gamers. This study found that the mutual support and help are equally important to giving unique virtual possessions to others.

### 5.1.3 Gaming Café as a Youth-Only “Third Place”

Oldenberg (2001) coined the term “third place” to describe the role of pubs and other retail outlets in consumers’ everyday lives. In China, Western restaurants such as McDonalds and Starbucks have become new “third places” for the citizens (e.g., Watson, 1997). In a similar fashion, my study found that gaming cafés have become a new “third place” for many Chinese youth. The rapidly increasing popularity of online games has increased the prevalence of gaming and socializing space for China’s young adults. Gaming cafés have now become the “playground” for the young generation in China. This new physical gathering area is surrounded by online gaming. The contradiction between the physical environment and the virtual experience in online gaming turns the gaming café into a unique “place” for the young
generation. The differences among gaming cafés (in terms of physical environment and price) also reflect the social status of the gamers.

In other words, the virtual socializing space has now integrated with physical face-to-face hangout space. Gaming cafés, a place where gamers spend 19% of their total playtime could be viewed as the intermediary between the nominal physical and virtual hangout spaces of the Chinese youth, minimally discussed in previous literature, where community bonding can take place. Unlike playing online games at home, on average 19% of an individual’s game time is held in this semi-public setting where this transcendence of atmosphere that allows gamers to connect more intimately with the gaming experience. The presence of food and beverages simply adds additional perks. In this cheap and convenient space, gamers can unite on both the virtual and the physical plane.

5.2 Online Gaming as Reconfiguration of Gender Identity and Relationships

My study on online gaming in China presents a new configuration of gender identity and relationship among the youth population. For centuries, females in China have been at a disadvantage. Often, girls were treated as inferior and relegated to the roles of housewife, caregiver, or subordinate to men (Wang, 2009). However, in recent decades, the power of women has grown with the evolution of various feminist movements. Workplaces have seen open acceptance of women in higher positions, something that was unacceptable in the past. Even though male dominance is still common, the female is quickly catching up in terms of equality and fairness in the real world. The Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China (2005) had a state mechanism “to promote gender equality and the
development of women. China is making unremitting efforts to improve its legal system to protect the rights and interests of women, formulate and implement programs regarding women's development, further improve relevant working organs, increase financial input and strengthen social awareness” (p. 1).

While female status is changing in China, online gaming virtual world remains a gendered space (73% male & 27% female), and in many cases, interaction between genders and discussions of gender have become controversial and problematic. Previous literature has mentioned that in the online realm, due to anonymity and its enablement of harassment and hate speech, there is also a strong likelihood of sexism, homophobia, and racism due to the absence of the emotional or physical consequences that can follow from face-to-face encounters with gender accountability (Nestle 1997). In a similar vein, Nakamura (2002) argues that “individual examples of person-to-person prejudice and harassment are ubiquitous within networked video games” (pg. 84).

Since its creation, technology and the online gaming realm have been a male-dominated culture. The approach that researchers and marketers use to describe gender disparities in online gaming often upholds the traditional associations between masculinity and technology, and the reverse dis-association of femininity and technology (Shaw, 2012). My findings create an alternate view of masculinity related to domesticity through the perception of the virtual space as both antagonist and protagonist to masculine identities. In the confined Chinese society, youth is rather limited in its ability to perform physical masculine practices. The general hegemonic theorizations of masculinity and consumption in the man-of-action hero model (Holt and Thompson 2004) in the arena away from home brings the young player into the virtual space of masculinity in skill levels, battles, and performance.
Huntemann (2002) portrays “a very common image in video game representations is a very hyper masculine male character. Someone who has an extremely imposing physical body, someone who is very muscular, someone who is certainly very aggressive; an effect of this hyper masculine characterization can also be to link being male with being violent” (pg. 6). However, since the arena is a virtual space on a monitor, the physical body is actually rather feminine and not aggressive, being domestically confined to a chair at home or in a gaming café. Thus, the in-game masculine reactions and results may create a mental contagion that affects real-life masculine experiences and thoughts but yet is labeled by society as “zhai nan”.

Online games in China originally targeted and promoted images of muscular men of great strength. Even with the recent growing fame of attractive females, the games are still male-targeted. In online gaming, there is a need to empower individuals by giving them a feeling that they can perform actions, be empathized with and listened to and make a difference for the world positively. However, Huntemann (2002) describes the tools for power that we use on the young generation in online games as often being those of a violent masculinity. Consider the fact that there are definitely barriers to females who wish to enter the gaming space. As Cassell and Jenkins (1998) describes, girls who play boys’ games find the games’ constructions of female sexuality and power are designed to gratify preadolescent males, not to particularly empower girls.

My research analyzes the virtual realm as a masculine space where men’s family identities intersect with their identities outside the house, including emotions such as anger and rage. My study both aligns with and challenges previous theoretical representations of masculinity and consumption practices. Many men in China, especially the affluent group, still believe females are the subordinate group in society. As mentioned in the findings chapter,
young male gamers use gaming to obtain a sense of control over the opposite gender by acting through female avatars in the virtual realm what may be almost impossible in the physical world. Belk (2013) notes that “in the digital world, the self is now extended into avatars, broadly construed, with which we identify strongly and which can affect our offline behavior and sense of self” (p. 490). Acting through such an avatar can provide an alternate form in the perception of hyper masculine control and empowerment—the unique experience of role-playing as the opposite gender. Such observations are in line with Yee’s (2014) article in which researcher found that men were three times more likely to play as female characters than women in online games (23% vs 7%) such as the World of Warcraft.

5.2.1 Doing Gender in Real/Offline Society and Online Gaming

The status and women’s role in the real world Chinese society is changing. Girlfriends need to be maintained and pleased as an extreme example, one man jumped to his death after his girlfriend demanded for more Christmas cloth shopping (Brady, 2013). Chen (2012) found that this gender gap developed speculation in which Chinese women sense a new form of empowerment when deciding potential spouses, and therefore delay the need to settle down with Chinese men. This leads to the consequence of high anxiety that Chinese men may feel they may never possibly find a wife. Tan, one informants of Chen’s (2012) notes this tread and quotes “Men are frustrated that they can't get a woman to date them seriously without material security. Women are frustrated that men can't obtain the necessary assets to secure them,” she explains. “Even if you don't care about money and assets at the moment, your parents probably will. The
link between dating, marriage and materialism is increasingly leading to pessimism and cynicism toward love” (p. 2).

With the traditional prized sons in mind, China’s sex ratio surplus of male babies reached 121.2 males born for every 100 females in 2004 with human intervention (Larson 2014). Decades ago, in China daughters were viewed as monetary burden for their parents without physical strength for labor; today in fact is the reverse outlook. In urban middle class cities, the pre-requisite for a groom in marriage is shouldering on the monetary responsibility to purchase an apartment along with his family. Guo Hui, a 31-year-old Beijing journalist, says, “If I have a baby, I would hope it’s a girl; boys are too expensive” (Larson, 2014, p. 2-3).

Furthermore, the divorce rate in China has also greatly increased from 0.4% in 1985 to over 2.67% in 2014 (Fan, 2015). FlorCruz (2015) and Cao (2015) found the rising divorce rate, particularly amongst the youth, is a result of progress for women’s right and social empowerment. Their findings show that previously divorce is rather humiliating. Currently the youth generation couples’ interpretation of marriage is now rather different than of their parents and divorce may not be a bad choice.

In virtual online gaming, previous research that has analyzed gender-switching in MMOs, where males are inclined to portray the appearance and some language behaviors representative of women playing female avatars, but did not adopt women’s movements (Martey et al., 2014). Previous studies proposed that “gender is a powerful social category; there are a range of ways it can be performed” (Martey et al., 2014, p. 295). In addition, some research proposes that some men use female avatars to get variety forms of assistance or kinder treatment from other players (Banks, 2013; Boler, 2007; Lehdonvirta et al., 2012). My research brings in additional value in the form of masculine control and belief of empowerment over the female body through gender-
switching, but their credibility may not be long lasting. The reality of traditional male dominance over obedient females is slowly diminishing in the real-world society, but Chinese youth can now reflect this concept in the virtual world, where the female avatar is obedient to the male gamer through the full control over the female’s body and being. For Chinese youth, online gaming is effectively a second life. Valentine (2007) argues particularly for “online transgender” as an identity category, as “age, race, class, and so on don’t merely inflect or intersect with those experiences we call gender and sexuality but rather shift the very boundaries of what ‘gender’ and sexuality can mean in particular contexts” (p. 100).

Butler (1990) observed that “gender is not something individuals possess. Rather, it is something they ‘do’ and perform. She argues that “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; ... identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (p. 25). This “doing gender” approach explains several elements of the thought process on how gender functions in online gaming culture.

The increase of female gamers within the past half-decade, in fact, addresses the change in female status in this male-dominant setting and signifies a new change of status quo within this industry. A breaking away from traditional roles in which a daughter obsessed with online games is abnormal while an equally obsessed teenage boy is common. In a western context where the major games are made, girl gamers are aggressively campaigning to have their tastes and interests factored into the development of action games (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998). As these major games are often imported into China, male gamers are excited see a new change of females within this virtual space. Of late, there has also been a development of female-centered online computer gamers; this is something new, special, unique and intriguing among young adults.
The marketers are promoting an oversexualized appeal of female images to keep males attracted, while this new notion of transsexual gender role online is in fact empowering male gamers. However, this does not change the negative attitudes young males have upon women within this new generation. In the short run, male gamers still reflect the larger culture's male dominant attitudes towards women in the gaming world.

In sum, my study brings value to the changing of status quo and gender roles among young adults. It is very important to understand gender roles in the study of online games. Gender theory has given us a useful framework for understanding how male and female players experience online games differently (e.g., Williams et al., 2009). My research adds value to the existing research by highlighting gender relationships and issues in the real/offline world with the virtual online gaming space as a reflection of the gender identity among the youth population in China.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

6.1 General Conclusion

Youth identity embodies itself in handling the multitude of cultural opportunities from past generations (Kjeldgaard & Askegaard, 2006). Protest and rebellion continues among the youth culture in China. Due to the limitations on dating and entertainment activities other than studying, my research finds, masculinity and materiality in online gaming have emerged as a tool in the creation of a new social order in defiance of communism. Following trends today is everything, and both boys and girls playing online games to enact power is one of those trends. This means of bonding and displaying masculinity through online gaming is what drinking was for a slightly earlier group of young adults. They also can enact as females to get closer to actual girl gamers and develop a feeling of something different within this male dominated space. The question of escape often arises, as if the youth are escaping from the constant pressure to study or escaping to create a new social order where relationships are further strengthened through a virtual world.

6.2 Theoretical Contributions

This study has drawn on a number of theoretical perspectives to explore the construction of Chinese youth culture through the investigation of the development of online gaming communities. My ethnographic study shows that online gaming is not merely a popular leisure
activity for young adults. Online gaming in fact plays an important role in shaping and re-
constructing youth identity and gender relationships in contemporary Chinese society.

Acting through various identities, young males see gaming as a form of escape from the limits of Chinese society. The formation of online communities and the re-presentation of masculinity and “brotherhood” redefine the male identity among the young generation. The notion of gender switching roles online is also very intriguing aspect of the gaming community.

Gender relationships have been re-shaped in online game communities. Females are no longer objects or an oppressed group in the community. Views of young females are no longer limited to sexual imagination, even though female bodies are still exploited by game developers and marketers. Males want to pose as female gamers because in reality, females would receive special treatment from the other male gamers and have more power to influence others because of their scarcity in this male-dominated community. The financial independence and upward mobility of females in China also changes the gender stereotype in that females are no longer subordinate to males.

Academics should understand that even though the overall Chinese society is still male-
dominated, it is rather the opposite among the younger generation, where in a relationship females are often in control, possibly as a result of the One-Child Policy. Policymakers may have to implement gender balances to improve the lives of young men, and there is a need for the gaming industry to begin concentrating on attracting the female segment of the youth market.
6.3 Practical Policy Implications

This study focused on the construction of “youth” identity and gender in popular culture (online gaming). My findings shed light for policymakers on the future development of education programs and regulations. For instance, the study of online gaming should not be limited to addictive behaviour; intergenerational conflict, gamers’ perception of self and the government, and social relationships in virtual and real-world settings are key areas policymakers should pay attention to.

Gender-related issues in online gaming would be another key topic that policymakers should further explore. In a male-dominated popular culture like online gaming, female bodies have become a commodity, ranging from hyper-sexual female in-game characters to showgirls in public events such as China Joy. The regulation of gender stereotypes and negative connotations would be a key responsibility of policymakers. The question of how to monitor market agents’ abuse of female bodies and how to keep online gaming a “clean” environment for Chinese youth requires further investigation.

6.4 Limitations and Future Research

There are several limitations on this study. First, my sample was limited to young males and their insights/overviews of the current materiality and hyper-masculinity context in China. Even though a couple of interviews were conducted with female informants, they were partners of hardcore male gamers rather than self-identified hardcore gamers. Future research can further explore the sociality of female gamers and their views of materiality and hyper-masculinity in
the online gaming community. This may include both hardcore gamers as well as light mobile gaming, which has boomed in the emerging economy.

Second, this study focused on the online gaming communities in Shanghai, one of the major cities in mainland China. While I believe my findings are robust enough to travel across booming cities within China, this study does not cover many rural areas and second-tier cities in the country. There is a general agreement among my findings that each online gamer is raised in a different household with different income levels and his concept/meaning of material consumption will not be identical to those of others. For example, one young male gamer may believe that spending money on material goods for a girl in maintaining the relationship outweighs looking better or even more powerful in the virtual realm, yet other young males may prefer to trade lunch money for greater virtual status. Future research could compare and contrast the differences between the urban and rural online gamers in terms of their identity projects and group behaviours.

Third, this study focused on examining the construction of masculinity and gamer identity through the gamers’ voices. Future ethnographic researchers can conduct interviews with marketers and professional gamers on their views of masculinity and consumption within the gaming market. The gaming industry is ever-evolving and the next big hit is very much up in the air. How market agents construct different identities to consumers is always an important topic for marketing researchers. In this case, how game developers and marketers construct and circulate different “ideals” and “gendered” identity markers to shape the young generation in an emerging economy would be an important research question for future online gaming research.

Fourth, the notion of transgender online gamers and Butler’s (1990) concept of performativity would be an intriguing area for further insights development. If one becomes
Habitual in the performing female gender roles, this may be a step into shifting the overall perception and status of women within the Chinese society. This may reduce men’s negative attitudes toward females within this upcoming generation. Future research will also have implications for feminist ideology and movements in China with the increase of female gamers and their changing roles amongst the community and society.

Last but not least, future research can conduct a cross-cultural analysis among online gamers and their construction of masculinity and materiality in the virtual world. My findings illustrate online gaming behaviors as culturally bounded. Gamers are living at the intersection of tradition Chinese culture and global consumer culture, of intergenerational expectations and societal norms, as well as the point of transition from childhood to adulthood. This study can be possibly replicated in a Western or non-Western cultural context and the findings may be compared.
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Appendix A: Interview Guide

UBC OKANAGAN – FACULTY OF MANAGEMENT

RESEARCH TOPIC: YOUTH IDENTITY, MASCULINITY, & GENDER RECONSTRUCTION IN MAINLAND CHINA

Grand Tour
Can you tell me a bit about yourself (How old are you? Where is your home town? How long have you been in Shanghai? What is your occupation?)

Where do you live and how many family members you have? How’s your relationship with your family/brothers and sisters/friends?

What are your favourite hobbies, TV/movies/games/sports/other activities? Why? What you usually do in your leisure time?

Introduction

Do you seem interested in online gaming? What is your opinion of it? Can you recall the first online game you played? Separating from high school until now? What games do you mainly play? Any others? Why do you play this kind of game? RPG? What’s your favorite game and character? Why? Can you share your gaming experience with me? How often do you play? Every day? Every week? What is your usual emotion when playing? What is your most enjoyable moment? Getting another level? Getting killing streaks? When do you feel frustrated about playing? Do you continue to play when you lose or win? Do you believe you feel addicted to online gaming?
Do you feel like you are able to escape reality and become someone else when you are in the online game? (Different world – don’t need to worry about the present)
Do you ever use foul language? (Fuck shit, etc.)
How do you handle when others curse at you?

**Friends**
Do you usually play with real-life friends or prefer to play alone in online games?
Do you think you develop deeper bonds with these friends through gaming? What else?
Do your peers have a strong influence on your gaming schedule? The time and length of your play?
Do you believe the people you meet online can become real-life friends? Have you had any examples? Female?
Have you ever feel the need and urge to improve your skills because your friends say you suck?
Have you trained others and friends to become better at a game?
Have you developed a community online with your friends?
Do you and how do you connect to other online gamers?
Are there other ways of friends bonding through gaming?
Yy chat platform? Wang ba?
Do you think there is another way in which friends can bond in a way similar to online gaming?
Do you think arguments can develop among friends because of online game play? Have you experienced any?

**Money/Market/Materiality**
How about your monetary consumption in relations to online gaming?
How much have you spent in total? Per month?
Do you think it was worth it? Zhi de ma?
Was this your parents’ money?
Have you used more money earlier in school? Now? Why? Because it is your own money now?
Have you ever tried to do online trading of virtual items?
Selling them back for real money?
Do you have intentions regarding some small business?
Do you think there is a difference between online virtual items and real products? Shoes? Most money in banks and stocks, virtual?
How do you view spending money in games? Does it improve the gaming experience?
Have your friends influenced you in paying money toward online gaming? How? (They use it to look better and more powerful in game?)
Does good gaming create a sense of pride among friends? How about shame for poor gaming skills?
How do you view buying virtual items as a present for your friends? Birthdays and different occasions?
Is there a difference between physical presents and virtual ones? Point Cards, for example?
Have you used more money in games because there is special event in game? (Like TI 4 Tournament? Or promotional discounts?)
Do you think the marketers of this game have done a good job? With advertisements? Events? Promotions? Shirts/Merchandise?
How do you think you might enhance/better your gaming experience?

Family/Parents
Do any of your family members engage in online gaming? How about online cell phone games?
How do your parents view and comment on online gaming? Are there perception differences? From the generation gap?
How about their view of video games versus online games? Mobile games? Same? Different?
Why do you think most parents are so against internet cafes and playing these games in Chinese culture?
Have you argued and fought with your parents before while playing these games?
Were there any stories? Like hiding a keyboard or mouse? Running away from home?
Do you think their view of playing these online games is right?
It is like a stereotype/tradition in China that gaming equals failure, low grades and horrible future jobs?
Do you think in China there is a strong culture on respect for elders and parents, but arguing with them in relations to gaming breaks this sacred view?
What do your parents do in their spare time? Anything online? Drama? Gambling?

Your Future
If you did have future children, how would you handle their desire to play games?
Would you treat them the same way your parents taught you?
What do you think some other alternatives to online gaming? Is it reasonable without consuming too much money?
Are there any alternatives that can replace online gaming for Chinese young adults at our age?
Do you ever see yourself working for the gaming industry?
Would you want to work on developing online games?
Or even do marketing or just be a part of a company whose games you enjoy? LOL / DOTA
Why do you think most people prefer ordinary jobs like banking or bigger companies?
How would your parents think of you working for an online gaming company? Would they have any opposition?
Also have you ever thought of becoming a professional gamer?
How is that viewed in China? My kid is a professional gamer…
Would you want to train full-time, 8 hours a day, 5 days a week, playing these online games?
Do you think this type of activity can be similar to pool and counted as a sport? E-sport?
Is there a Chinese symbol of pride? Winning tournaments? Like in the World Cup?
Have you made any bets? On a favorite fan team/player? Or would you bet in the future if they became a big hit?

**Gender Relationships/Masculinity**
How about relationships? Girlfriends? How were their views/comments on your playing online games?
Would you choose one over the other? Online games vs. girlfriend? Find a balance?
Did you have quarrels with your girlfriend when you spend too much time playing these games?
Is it a stereotype that it is manly to play online games? Feminine to shop? Watch dramas?
Or would you want your girlfriend to play these online games with you?
Does it make you feel better or worse when they play these games with you and your friends?
How are girls playing these games viewed in China?
Would you want your girlfriend to play with you or even possibly another game?
Have you tried changing your Identity online to possibly play a female gaming character?
How does that feel? Or have you seen any examples?
Do these female online identities get more benefits from guys?
Would you buy virtual items for girls online?
Do you know of girls using money in online games in cell phones? Is that more common to play these smaller games?

**Gaming Culture and Tradition**
Gaming culture in China—do you think it is different than elsewhere? Like compared with the USA or Western culture?
Do you think there is too much emphasis on traditional studying? Limiting fun and gaming during high school?
Will this culture slowly or quickly change? Why do you think it is this way?
Population size? Communism? Fewer available jobs in the market?
Why do you think Chinese young adults are so into playing these games versus other countries?
Maybe too controlled? And when free, unable to handle reality?
Do you think playing these games makes one fit into the group? Do you have any good guy friends that do not play these games?
If yes, why do you think they do not play?
Do you think becoming better in online gaming can be practiced to become professional or does it relate to IQ culture/inborn/genetic skills (basketball born Black – athletic + practice).

**Safety/Gaming Cafes**
Gaming café vs at-home gaming? What is the perception of the Chinese older generation?
How about you? How do you feel about gaming at home vs wang ba? Differences?
Which do you prefer? Wang ba, better environment with friends or relaxed, convenient stay-at-home gaming?
How do you feel about Hacking issues? In-game cheating? Is that less seen now compared to before?
Also, about getting your account or virtual items stolen—did you pay a lot for these? Do you think it feels the same or different from losing something you can touch, like shoes or cell phone?

Conclusion
At what age do you think you will stop gaming?
Would it be when your friends stop? There are 40+-year-olds still playing these games and it is becoming more common.
How is your view on the overall gaming industry in China? Growing rapidly? Slowing down? Any changes?
How has online gaming changed the Chinese cultural views with these online games and the digital world as even 2-year-olds now carry iPads?
What do you think the future of gaming is going to be like?
(Some previous examples include a shift to more sports-related games like Wii or xbox Kinect, exercise games or more concentration on mobile gaming?)
Can you share any good or bad experiences related to your online game activities? Great stories that happened in your life in relation to online games or video games?