

**Master of Science in Marketing – written comprehension required by all applicants**

Studying a subject at Masters level often involves examining aspects of the topic that are quite different from what students would have encountered at under graduate level. Masters students are required to think more critically and analyse topics in a much greater depth than they may be accustomed to. The paper that you have been asked to read '*Wii are family: consumption, console gaming and family togetherness*' is an excellent example of this.

Please read the 'Wii Are Family' paper and discuss the following questions:

1. What do you consider to be the most interesting point in this paper? Please explain why you find it so interesting.
2. What can we conclude about Marketing and its impact on society from reading this paper?
3. How could Marketers generally (not the Marketing team in Nintendo) use the information that the authors have provided us with in this paper?

You should be able to carry out this project using between 1000 and 1500 words.

# *Wii* are family: consumption, console gaming and family togetherness

*Wii* are family

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to understand the relationship between family togetherness and consumption. This is important given the inherent tension permeating discourses of family consumption and a lack of a critical understanding about how togetherness is experienced, expressed and performed. The Nintendo *Wii* and *Wii* gaming were explicitly chosen to engage in a more nuanced understanding and to provide a route to access families in their natural consumption habitat.

**Design/methodology/approach** – An interpretive ethnographic methodology was utilised to investigate family consumption in context and used in conjunction with the biographical narrative interpretive method to capture reflective and detailed informants' consumption experiences. Holistic content analysis was used to interpret and aid thematic development.

**Findings** – Opportunities for idealised family togetherness afforded by the *Wii* still appeal to family members. Idealised family togetherness is accessed through collective, "proper" *Wii* gaming but is ultimately unsustainable. Importantly, the authors see that relational togetherness and bonding is also possible, and as such, the lived experience, expression and performance of family togetherness are not prescriptive.

**Originality/value** – Family togetherness is a useful and important lens through which to understand the dynamic relationship between family, consumption and the marketplace. The authors suggest that current conceptualisations of togetherness are too idealised and prescriptive and should be open to critical rethinking and engagement by both academics and industry practitioners to communicate with and about families and to explore how to be part of relevant and meaningful family conversations.

**Keywords** Consumption, Family, Ethnography, Console gaming, Togetherness

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

The relationship between family and consumption is of particular interest to scholars in marketing (O'Malley and Prothero, 2006, 2007; Kerrane *et al.*, 2014). Extant research explores how consumption supports family members in their interactions and identifies performances and experiences of togetherness (Wallendorf and Arnould, 1991; Epp and Price, 2008; Epp *et al.*, 2014). However, family consumption activities are increasingly beset by tensions framed by a politicisation of decision-making (Gillies, 2011) and a moralising public discourse about *bad* and *good* consumption (Lindsay and Maher, 2013). Here, console gaming (Chambers, 2012a), media consumption (Valentine and Hughes, 2011) and unhealthy food choices (Moisio *et al.*, 2004) are regularly held as examples of *bad* consumption. These are inevitably contrasted with activities such as engagement with after school activities (Dunn *et al.*, 2003), visits to museums (Ellenbogen, 2002) and home cooking (Simmons and Chapman, 2012), which are considered to support child development and family cohesion.



Further, discourses of family life encompass moral judgments about the *right* way of being a family (Kremer-Sadlik *et al.*, 2008) and, increasingly, require that leisure time should be spent in purposive family activities to achieve togetherness (Shaw and Dawson, 2001). We are particularly interested here in this idea of family togetherness (Richards, 1990; Ribbens-McCarthy, 2012), introduced in the 1950s (by a women's magazine) to signify family unity in post-war America (Spigel, 2013). Informed by more recent discourses of "intensive motherhood" (Hays, 1996) and "involved fatherhood" (Marsiglio, 1995), the pursuit of family togetherness is said to require the willing participation of *all* family members in purposive practices (Shaw and Dawson, 2001). These practices then become instruments of self-presentation deployed by families to convince themselves and others that they are united and whole (Obrador, 2012). Reflecting and reinforcing these wider discourses, family togetherness becomes a central motif in advertising and is particularly obvious in the marketing of homes, holidays, food and entertainment to families (Schänzel and Yeoman, 2015). Evident within contemporary discourses and proliferated by the media, the ideology of togetherness encourages families to strive towards this elusive ideal (Jallinoja, 2008; Shaw, 2008; Kremer-Sadlik *et al.*, 2008).

Family consumption is understandably complex and contested. More than simply the selection of goods and services, family consumption represents a choice about how families interact (Holttinen, 2014), how they see themselves and how they wish to be perceived by others (Martens *et al.*, 2004). The term *consuming families* (Phillips, 2008, p. 93) was coined to describe the collaborative consumption activities that contribute to family life. Thus, occasions and events such as Christmas (Tynan and McKechnie, 2006), Thanksgiving (Wallendorf and Arnould, 1991), family holidays (Schänzel and Yeoman, 2015) and family meals (Fulkerson *et al.*, 2006) become important opportunities to foster and perform family togetherness. Conversely, there is also a view that the market may actually be undermining the potential for togetherness (Hochschild, 2003). Suggestions abound that time is increasingly consumed by the market and consequently lost to the family (Shaw, 2008), and that parents offer their children market-based commodities in compensation (Pocock and Clarke, 2004). Market forces are also seen to encroach upon private domestic spaces, encouraging individualised and atomised consumption (Chambers, 2012a) and promoting a growth in *bedroom culture* (Bovill and Livingstone, 2001) with family members dispersed throughout the home (Bahr *et al.*, 2004). Here, consumption is believed to de-centre families (Bahr *et al.*, 2004), implying that "families are consumed as well as consuming" (Lindsay and Maher, 2013, p. 53).

The reality of course is that the consuming family is both in and of the market (Lindsay and Maher, 2013), and that "adults and children anticipate, collaborate and frequently problematise family relations and meanings through consumption practices" (Phillips, 2008, p. 99). Our intention in this paper is to advance understanding of how consumption is implicated in the pursuit of togetherness, exploring connections between family life and the market. We focus empirically on family interaction with the *Nintendo Wii*, a gaming technology that explicitly targeted families and promoted shared leisure engagement. Introduced in 2005, the *Wii* was understood as a progressive domestic communication technology through which "to perform family togetherness" (Chambers, 2012a, p. 75), and thus, it offers an ideal opportunity for our purposes. Although now a historical artefact, the reverberations of the *Wii* are still felt, and it enables us to explore the pursuit of family togetherness and illuminate how marketplace ideologies impact families. The paper continues by outlining the context of the research in respect of debates around the impact of gaming consoles on family life and the related positioning of the *Wii*. Next, we describe the ethnographic study of four families where interactions with and around the *Wii* were

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observed over two years. The research offers access to the motivations and experiences of family members on an individual and collective basis. We conclude with a discussion of the key themes to emerge from the research and some directions for further research.

### Media, entertainment and console gaming

Gaming consoles have become ubiquitous in the homes and lives of contemporary families, with an estimated 2.2 billion gamers worldwide, in a market worth almost \$109bn globally ([newzoo.com](http://newzoo.com), 2017). Although media and entertainment technologies are “part of a rich interplay of cultural artefacts and practices that make family life complex and formative” (Pigeron, 2009), they have been heavily implicated in the destruction of family togetherness (Bahr *et al.*, 2004). With some exceptions (Aarsand, 2007; Aarsand and Aronsson, 2009; Ulicsak and Cranmer, 2010; Coyne *et al.*, 2011), research concerning the impact of console gaming on family life paints a largely negative picture. Indeed, innovations in, and the duplication, multiplication and growth of home-based entertainment technologies have led to public anxieties around a crisis of family (Chambers, 2012a; Silva, 2010) as product proliferation and competitive pricing render such technologies accessible to most families (Lindsay and Maher, 2013).

Essentially, concerns with console gaming coalesce around three main issues: sedentary gaming, spatial dispersion and individualisation. First, sedentary gaming (requiring only the movement of ones’ thumbs) is regularly implicated in rising obesity rates amongst children (Lindsay and Maher, 2013) with exhortations to get children away from consoles and other media in favour of more active, and preferably, outdoor pursuits (Shaw, 2008). Second, the prevalence of gaming consoles and other media in the home is seen to promote bedroom culture (Bovill and Livingstone, 2001) such that living rooms are no longer hubs of family leisure (Chambers, 2012a). Third, concerns are raised that gaming by children is an increasing cause of tension within families (Chambers, 2012b), where escape to altered digital realities forms the “basis for a range of mass culture cautionary tales of technological seduction and dystopian societies” (Kozinets, 2008, p. 869). Technologically mediated pleasure, escape, expression and the liberation that consoles provide are thought to easily turn antisocial, addictive and frivolous (Kozinets, 2008). Cumulatively, these criticisms lead to anxieties about young people growing up in technologised social worlds that engender social isolation, low self-esteem and social incompetence (Vandebosch and Van Cleemput, 2009).

It was against this backdrop that *Nintendo* launched the *Wii*, positioning it to challenge many negative associations of console gaming. *Nintendo* attempted to reinvent gaming, making it more social, intuitive and group-oriented (Grossman, 2006). To circumvent perceptions that console gaming and healthy living were antithetical (Millington, 2016), *Nintendo* sought to transform gaming from a passive to an active experience by making it more physically engaging, thus liberating gamers from the traditional sedentary experience (Grossman, 2006). *Nintendo* also explicitly placed the *Wii* at the centre of family life, locating it within a family living area, providing a new space where gaming could be enacted (Chambers, 2012a) and effectively (re)claiming the living room as the centre of family interaction in the process.

The introduction of the *Wii* essentially invented the family-friendly console market (Ewalt, 2006), in part because its games were designed to be easy to learn and group-oriented (Chambers, 2012a), allowing mixed ability groups, regardless of age or gender, to play with one another (Shinkle, 2008). It offered opportunities for interactions between parents and children (Coyne *et al.*, 2011) in a context that might have traditionally excluded parents. *Nintendo* further cultivated family-centred play by offering a plethora of game

choices (Chambers, 2012b), enabling families to spend quality time together (Shaw, 2001). In stark contrast to images of other games consoles that articulate the techspressive ideology (Kozinets, 2008) of cool, youthful and action packed images, *Wii* advertising emphasised family fun and togetherness (Chambers, 2012a; Craig and Mullan, 2012). It is this focus on togetherness that is central to our interest here.

## 2008

### Methodology

Our choice of methodology was informed by discussions and insights within the sociology of consumption, consumer behaviour and consumer culture theory on how best to advance research on family. This study eschews a focus on individual behaviour and attempts to consider plurality within family structures (Kerrane and Hogg, 2013) with explicit efforts to gauge how parents and children experience family togetherness. Thus, this study counteracts a number of criticisms historically associated with family research by incorporating a *whole family* methodology that specifically includes the experiences of fathers and children (Kerrane *et al.*, 2014; Lindsay and Maher, 2013).

To understand the experience of families in context, the design of this study was ethnographic in nature. As a result, families were chosen to ensure a high degree of access to family life rather than to represent the diversity of family structures[1]. Four families who own a *Nintendo Wii* and that were known to one of the researchers agreed to participate in the study, allowing a weeklong period of observation in their respective homes. The families comprised of 17 informants, which included 8 parents and 9 participating children of 6-18 years of age. The study was designed to adhere to the highest standards of ethical guidelines, informed by ESOMAR and the Market Research Society (MRS) (2006) and approved by the University Ethics Committee. The families incorporate a range of demographic profiles, including educational attainments, income, occupations, ethnicity, age and gender (Tables I-IV).

Biographical narrative interpretive method (BNIM) interviews (Wengraf, 2001) were conducted in family homes over several months, post observation periods, on a family-by-family basis, and the entire data collection phase took place over 24 months. By offering a systematic approach to access and interpret individual narratives, BNIM supports research into “the lived experience of individuals and collectives” (Wengraf and Chamberlayne, 2006, p. 2), allows for whole case comparisons and provides a foundation for comparing situated practices and processes of different interest to the researcher (Wengraf and Chamberlayne, 2006). Each informant became narrator of their own story, and these collectively created family narratives that were sometimes consistent but often contested.

Name	Age	Nationality	Occupation/education status	Children (no., gender, age and family status)
Luke	46	Irish	Full-time psychiatric nurse	Two biological children, one 18-year-old son and one 14-year-old daughter
Lilly	48	English	Part-time general nurse	Two biological children, one 18-year-old son and one 14-year-old daughter
Cian	18	Dual English and Irish	Full-time secondary school student/part-time retail sales	N/A
Lucy	14	Dual English and Irish	Full-time secondary school student	N/A

**Table I.**  
The Hanlon family profile

**Table II.**  
The Da Souza family profile

Name	Age	Nationality	Occupation/education status	Children (no., gender, age and family status)
José	48	Brazilian	Unemployed (during fieldwork, subsequently employed in the IT sector, prior to research interview several months later)	One 25-year-old biological son (first marriage), one 16-year-old son and one 11-year-old daughter (second family)
Amanda	43	Irish	Full-time construction purchasing manager	Two biological children, one 16-year-old son and one 11-year-old daughter
Mathew	16	Dual Brazilian and Irish	Full-time secondary school student	N/A
Amelia	11	Dual Irish and Brazilian	Full-time primary school student	N/A

**Table III.**  
The Kelly family profile

Name	Age	Nationality	Occupation/education status	Children (no., gender, ages and family status)
Shane	35	Irish	Mechanic	One 17-year-old biological son (previous relationship, not living in family home non research participant), one 14-year-old step son (living in family home) and one 6-year-old biological daughter (second family)
Melissa	37	Irish	Full-time retail manager	One 14-year-old biological son (previous relationship) and one 6-year-old biological daughter (both in family home); and one 17-year-old step son (not living in family home non research participant)
Declan	14	Irish	Full-time secondary school student	N/A
Mollie	5	Irish	Full-time primary school student	N/A

**Table IV.**  
The Hernandez family profile

Name	Age	Nationality	Occupation/education status	Children (no., gender, age and family status)
Alex	50	Brazilian	Full-time retail entrepreneur	One 22-year-old biological daughter (previous marriage, not living in family home non research participant); and one 14-year-old biological son and 10-year-old biological twin daughters (second family)
Ellen	41	Irish	Part-time retail sales assistant	One 22-year-old step daughter (not living in family home non research participant); and one 14-year-old biological son and 10-year-old biological twin daughters
Sam	14	Dual Brazilian and Irish	Full-time secondary school student	N/A
Amy	10 twin	As above	Full-time primary school student	N/A
Beth	10 twin	As above	Full-time primary school student	N/A

The planned and purposive selection of informants facilitated open discussion and put informants at ease, allowing them to feel more comfortable in relating their stories. Interviews took place in the family home to facilitate a relaxed atmosphere. Each informant was interviewed separately, resulting in 34 interviews (encompassing both subsession one and subsession two typical in BNIM structured interviews). The initial interview started with a SQUIN (a single question aimed to induce narrative) designed to elicit all or part of the life-story and lived experiences of the informant in relation to the *Wii* (Wengraf, 2006). As such, no predetermined discussion was envisaged and no subsequent questions were asked. Each of the SQUIN subsessions lasted between 4 and 33 min and was followed by a short interlude. The interlude provided time to identify particular incident narratives that were used to develop further questions about important topics raised. These notes were valuable in the preparation of TQUINs (topic questions to induce narrative) used in Subsession 2.

Subsession 2 comprised of TQUINs only, carefully-constructed on chosen cue-phrases, pushing for more story and details (Wengraf, 2001). Here, they elicited further narratives about the most pertinent topics. As per interview criteria, the same sequence of topics to emerge in Subsession 1 was used in Subsession 2, sticking rigidly to the words used by the informant. This strategy continued until all new topics were addressed, again in the sequence raised by the informant so as not to “break the gestalt ordering” (Wengraf and Chamberlayne, 2006, p. 13). These sessions typically lasted between 45 min and 3 h.

Holistic content analysis (Lieblich *et al.*, 1998) was used to draw interpretations from the data. First, individual interview transcripts were read in detail several times on an individual informant basis and then on a family-by-family basis. These readings enabled the research team to become immersed in the data and to refine and aid thematic development. This “non-judgmental reading, which refrained from extensive theoretical interpretation” (Lieblich *et al.*, 1998, p. 76), focussed on how each informant characterised the importance of the *Wii* in their family. Second, initial and global impressions were put into writing with a focus, this time, on exceptions to the general impression and unusual features of the story such as contradictions or unfinished descriptions. Field notes were useful in supporting this process, particularly when interview transcripts diverged from what was actually observed. Third was a process similar to Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) axial coding. Special foci were distinguished by the space devoted to them in the text, their repetitive nature and the number of details the informants provided about them. Finally, each theme was followed throughout the story. The appearance of themes for the first and last time, the transition between themes, the context for each one and their relative salience in the text were duly noted similar to Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) selective coding. Special attention was again paid to instances that seemed to contradict the theme in terms of content, mood or evaluation of the informant. Moving back and forth between the transcripts allowed the data to be compared and subsequently analysed with the existing thematic categories to detect similarity and difference until the bigger picture began to emerge. The process was continual and, therefore, as themes emerged, they were examined, discarded and refined as the fusion of horizons began to merge from both the researchers and respondents’ perspectives.

### **From family fun to “proper” play**

While the console was bought as a birthday or Christmas gift for one or other of the children in all four families, *Nintendo*’s positioning of the *Wii* as family-friendly appears to have been a significant motivation. As Ellen explains:

When I was looking into getting the *Wii* for them, I thought it was something that the whole family could use more so than just Sam [14] with say the Xbox [...] it was still a computer game

but because you were actually getting off the sofa and standing up to participate it was just a better form of entertainment and it kind of grew from there then. It wasn't just for the kids [...] there are some games there for Mama, there is something there for Dad, there is something there for us all actually. (Ellen, 41, Mum, Hernandez family)

For Ellen, *Wii* gaming is better than the solo, dispersed and inactive gaming of teenage boys on *PlayStation* or *Xbox* (Jansz *et al.*, 2010). She is particularly pleased that it involves “actually getting off the sofa”, perhaps because, like many other mothers, she worries about her children's levels of physical activity (Shaw, 2008). Moreover, there is an explicit recognition here that the *Wii* moves gaming beyond the exclusive domain of teenage boys, thereby making *whole* family gaming possible (Chambers, 2012a). For other mothers, the appeal of *Wii* gaming similarly revolves around family:

We did it as a family, the four of us [...] and we had great fun. The kids thoroughly enjoyed it [...] it would be competitive, great fun, very good fun. (Melissa, 37, Mum, Kelly family)

The four of us have played it at home [...] it's really good fun [...] everybody can play it so it means that it can be played as a family game. The PlayStation can't be played as a family game. The Nintendo DS can't be played as a family game [...] But we all have great [fun] – the whole lot of us together [...] and it's good. (Amanda, 43, Mum, Da Souza family)

Here, we see a very limited palette of words being used by mothers to describe *Wii* gaming (e.g. family, fun and together), with togetherness alluded to directly or indirectly (e.g. “the four of us”). That the *Wii* is centred on family and fun is unequivocally reiterated by the children who draw explicitly on the advertising campaigns used by *Nintendo*:

The *Wii* is very family orientated [...] you see it on the adverts for it and you have families playing them [...] the *Wii* [ads] are more family orientated. Mums, children, teenagers, all just sort of playing away [...] There are basically four people on the couch pointing at the screen. (Cian, 18, Student, Hanlon family)

[The ads are] very good [...] because it's saying like, “that's a family”. The *Wii* is for the family and all ages can enjoy it and that really the adults kind of want to play on it. (Declan, 14, Student, Kelly family)

“Four people on the couch” is a common visual code used to represent family (Borgerson *et al.*, 2006). Here, the children clearly understand that the *Wii* is for families. Even fathers appreciate this sentiment:

In relation to the *Wii* [...] I believe it has been an addition to lots and lots of families ... It brings people together [...] families interact a lot more around it. So you know for me it's very positive. I'm all for it. (José, 48, Dad, Da Souza family)

Family members recognise that *Wii* gaming “brings people together”, both in terms of co-presence and in terms of experiencing togetherness:

It has been interesting to see the interaction of the family around the game [...] having fun and getting the greatest laugh out of it. Especially when there is a mixture of adults and kids ... it's a great piece of technology to entertain the family. Well, when we want to be in each other's company and play it and have a laugh together [...] and you know, we not only entertain ourselves individually but also as a family [...] So that obviously creates a stronger bond, you know, amongst us [...] having a laugh together. We always feel happy about doing it because we enjoy each other's company. Situations like that, you actually learn a lot more about each other as well. (José, 48, Dad Da Souza family)

Togetherness involves more than just having fun. It is about building bonds and being a family (Sloan, 2011). Playing the *Wii* provides family members with opportunities to learn about themselves and each other (Shaw, 2008) as everyone gets the chance to experience and express different emotions while sharing an activity (Ribbens-McCarthy, 2012):

We all have different opinions and different temperaments. Obviously those things are exposed throughout the games according to the challenges and the happiness and the frustrations that go along with it [...] So it's good to find out a bit more about each other in those moments [...] and have a laugh and see, expose our, our sense of competitiveness for instance and our level of anger and things like that at the same time. So we can show more of our emotions around the game. (José, 48, Dad Da Souza family)

This is purposive leisure (Shaw and Dawson, 2001; Shaw, 2008). As José articulates it, the *Wii* provides opportunities for togetherness and learning. Promoted within discourses of intensive motherhood and involved fatherhood (Forsberg, 2007b; Shaw, 2008), this kind of leisure is generally valued by parents and is seen to benefit children and the family as a whole. However, these benefits can only be fully realised if families play “properly”:

I would get the *Wii* [...] put it on a big massive telly one day in the week, bring a game and no television. There will just be the *Wii* and we can have half an hour of just everybody playing. This is good, this is absolutely brilliant in my point of view [...] I think that would be brilliant family time but [...] everyone has to agree about it. (Alex, 50, Dad, Hernandez family)

It is apparent that what Alex understands as “proper” play is heavily informed by how family gaming is represented in *Wii* advertising, which, in turn, reflects and reinforces family togetherness and contemporary parenting ideologies. This kind of gaming requires some planning and organisation so that family members all set time aside (Shaw *et al.*, 2008; Craig and Mullan, 2012). This idea of allocating time for a family game night evidences nostalgia for a pre-digital era. By speaking in the conditional tense that it “would be brilliant family time”, Alex suggests that while this kind of family togetherness is valued, it is not always achieved (Langford *et al.*, 2001). Moreover, in highlighting that “everyone has to agree about it”, we begin to appreciate how axiomatic it is that family members must all actively *choose* to spend time together (Kremer-Sadlik *et al.*, 2008). This influences how children and adults understand how and where *Wii* gaming should happen and creates expectations that parents (and even grandparents) might also participate (Chambers, 2012a). While parents understand the benefits of purposive leisure with their children, this is not a guarantee that they will participate regularly, or even occasionally.

### Failure to play

It seems that families' expectations regarding the *Wii*, particularly in terms of how they should play, set them up for failure. Because families understand that there is a “proper” way to play the *Wii* – together, as a family – the inability to follow through on this ideal can be internalised as failure *to be a family*. As time passed, parents across all four families participated less and less in *Wii* gaming, mostly because of other commitments (work and domestic). The mothers put this down to the vagaries of modern life:

Yeah, I think it's a good game. Only I wish I had more time to play it. But I don't play it with her or them, all of us actually. That's just modern day life. (Amanda, 43, Mum, Da Souza family)

It kind of makes me feel guilty now for not [*Wii* gaming] more with them ... But it all revolves back to time [...] I think it's just the working mother's syndrome. It's not having the time that [...] I know I'm not the only one. But I would love to spend more time with them and have more time to play with them. (Melissa, 37, Mum, Kelly family)

Mothers bemoan the lack of opportunity to play more of the *Wii* with their children. This, of course, is less about the *Wii* than it is about spending quality time together with their children, and the *Wii* is just one example of where they see themselves as failing to engage with their children and, therefore, not demonstrating involved parenting (Forsberg, 2007a). The mothers acknowledge that “modern day life” and “working mother syndrome” limit opportunities to engage in leisure activities with their children. This is particularly challenging for Lilly, whose job as a nurse involves working shifts:

If I just got up from having had a sleep from the night shift and I might not be, probably wouldn't be feeling up to starting to exercise, and I certainly wouldn't feel like doing it coming in from work. (Lilly, 48, Mum, Hanlon family)

While Lilly expresses how working shifts and being tired limit her motivation/ability to play the *Wii*, for Melissa, it is the demands of work and the challenges of juggling work and home:

Well, I could be spending more time with them [. . .] my work is, it's hard like, tough, very tough at the moment and things like that [. . .] But feeling guilty for being gone all day every day, yeah just not being there for them [. . .] I would love to do part-time [work] if I could. I would have more time with them, but we just couldn't afford to do that. That's all, it's just not viable. (Melissa, 37, Mum, Kelly family)

On one level, it seems that the realities of modern life simply intrude on opportunities for family togetherness (Coltrane and Adams, 2008). Melissa articulates her guilt as involving much more than simply not playing the *Wii*, it relates to being out of the home all day and “just not being there for them”. However, reducing her working hours is not financially viable. Instead, as with other mothers, household chores or personal leisure are the things that suffer (Shaw, 2008). In contrast, fathers in the study were quite matter of fact about their levels of engagement and did not seem to experience the same levels of guilt or frustration. For example, although Alex clearly articulates how the *Wii* should be played as a family, his wife Ellen tells a very different story on his level of engagement:

I think that the *Wii* if it's not played properly, it breaks the family. If it's played properly all the family could be more interactive but at the same time people need to be eager to do this [. . .] I like the *Wii* but only if it's played like this. But the way it's being played here in this house, or maybe most of the other houses, it just breaks the family, because you have one party upstairs, the other party in the other room, the other party in their room and the other one God knows where. (Alex, 50, Dad, Hernandez family)

[We haven't played] as a whole family, no. Me and the kids yes. Oh no, Alex came in one time, we were all playing it, he had a chance to play, but [. . .] I don't know whether he couldn't see the telly [. . .] But then again I suppose I had played it about 20 times at that stage, so I was kind of a pro at it! And I think it was only about the once the whole lot of us was playing this thing. But at the expense of Alex, they [her children] thought it was funny that he was so bad at it. (Ellen, 41, Mum, Hernandez family)

Alex prefers to blame the *Wii* and “the way it's being played” in his house. This resonates with historical critiques of gaming consoles – solo gaming and children dispersed throughout the home – something that happens in the Hernandez household. Rather than crediting the *Wii* with bringing the family together, Alex implicates it in the de-centring of families (Bahr *et al.*, 2004). During the observation period, the *Wii* was often relocated to peripheral locations either to facilitate individual gaming or to resolve tensions related to ownership of the “family” TV (often instigated by fathers in the study). Also, it seems that even though by her own account Ellen participated numerous times, Alex's failure to engage meant that “family gaming” did not occur, at least in daughter Amy's eyes:

I came up with the idea of family game night [. . .] but it only lasted a week so, it wasn't that good [. . .] I told my Mum and Dad and stuff about it and then we kept on asking them, "Oh could we play it" and "would they, could they play it with us" and they said [. . .] "Yeah, in a few minutes". They ended up not playing it with us. (Amy, 10, Student, Hernandez family)

Thus, it seems that if both parents are not involved, it does not count as "family" gaming. The lack of parental involvement also became apparent in the Da Souza family:

When we are available, yeah, we play with her [Amelia]. I play with her [. . .] recently I have been unavailable most of the time [. . .] But you know, if I am around and I can do it, I will do it with her no problem. (José, 48, Dad, Da Souza family)

It seems that parents rarely get involved in digital media play, usually citing technical knowhow, personal interests and ideas about how shared time should be spent (Reich *et al.*, 2013). Indeed, José, by his own admission, is unavailable most of the time. Observation reveals that he is often at home and not working while his daughter Amelia plays on her own. Moreover, on one occasion, an impromptu *Wii* session began between his wife Amanda and the children, but José continued to watch a football game on TV. Thus, José seems comfortable prioritising his own leisure preferences over *Wii* gaming. In the Kelly family, Shane is unapologetic about his lack of participation in *Wii* gaming:

My experience of it is that I have no time [interest] for it. I don't have any time [interest] for any of those games [. . .] I just don't like video games full stop . . . I prefer a board game or a card game. (Shane, 35, Dad, Kelly family)

The fathers in this study tended to be quite comfortable with pursuing their individual interests and hobbies (reading the paper, cycling and baking) over *Wii* gaming, even when explicitly asked to participate by their children. None of the fathers were ever observed playing board or card games with their children, and it seems that participation in family leisure activities was not a priority for them. Despite this, they all have good relationships with their children and engaged in their children's lives in other ways, often in the day-to-day caring activities including meal preparation. Thus, an important distinction arises between how mothers and fathers understand the demands of family togetherness. Although the participation of mothers and fathers in *Wii* gaming reduced considerably over time, fathers tend not to worry about this or indeed to notice it. Mothers, on the other hand, experience guilt and frustration and often seek out ways to get involved (Guendouzi, 2006). Moreover, they rarely managed to carve out what they understand as "me time". Children, in a similar manner to their fathers, were also happy to pursue their own interests and did not seem in any way perturbed by a lack of parental gaming, although they enjoy it when it happens. We return to these issues in the discussion.

### Intrafamilial play

We can see from Table V that whole family gaming did occur when the *Wii* was first acquired but that none occurred during the observation period. It is also noteworthy that none of the fathers participated in any *Wii* gaming during this time either[2]. Solo gaming occurred rarely in most houses but was frequent in the Da Souza family during observation, with Amelia spending on average 3 h solo gaming per day throughout the observation period.

Intrafamilial play occurred in all families primarily in the guise of sibling-sibling play (brother-sister predominantly) and parent-child play (mother-daughter specifically). Informant accounts attest that gameplay between siblings occurred frequently when the *Wii* was first acquired and has continued since then. Indeed, throughout the observation period,

**Table V.**  
Families *Wii* gaming:  
Type and frequency

Host family	<i>Wii</i> Gaming: type and frequency	Initial introduction	During observation	Current situation
<i>Hernandez family</i>				
	Whole family gaming	Frequently	Never	Never
	Sibling–sibling gaming	Frequently	Frequently	Rarely
	Mother–child gaming	Frequently	Rarely	Rarely
	Father–child gaming	Rarely	Never	Never
	Solo gaming	Frequently	Rarely	Rarely
<i>Da Souza family</i>				
	Whole family gaming	Frequently	Never	Never
	Sibling–sibling gaming	Frequently	Never	Never
	Mother–child gaming	Frequently	Rarely	Rarely
	Father–child gaming	Rarely	Never	Never
	Solo gaming	Frequently	Frequently	Frequently
<i>Kelly Family</i>				
	Whole family gaming	Rarely	Never	Never
	Sibling–sibling gaming	Frequently	Frequently	Rarely
	Mother–child gaming	Frequently	Rarely	Rarely
	Father–child gaming	Never	Never	Never
	Solo gaming	Never	Rarely	Rarely
<i>Hanlon family</i>				
	Whole family gaming	Never	Never	Never
	Sibling–sibling gaming	Frequently	Frequently	Rarely
	Mother–child gaming	Frequently	Frequently	Rarely
	Father–child gaming	Never	Never	Never
	Solo gaming	Frequently	Rarely	Rarely

sibling–sibling gaming was most dominant in families, accounting for over half of the 50 h of gaming recorded. Indeed, observation supports that the Kelly siblings enjoy playing with each other despite the very significant age difference between them:

Circa 2 p.m. Mollie sets up the *Wii* to play. Declan is lying down on the couch observing her. Mollie informs me that she is red i.e. playing with the red remote control. Declan suggests a game of bowling, Mollie says ‘no’. Eventually Mollie goes through the menu to find bowling. She pulls up the Mii selection and I can see that there is a Mii for everyone in the house. She seems more familiar with this game. She also stands very close to the screen. She plays well and high fives me. Then Declan takes his turn. He swings quite strongly when he plays. Mollie does a celebratory dance when she does well again drawing attention to her good game playing. Declan plays without the strap attached to his wrist and he too has his version of a celebratory dance. Mollie at times gets in Declan’s face and they niggle at each other quite regularly. They even squabble when passing the control from one to the other. Declan draws attention to the fact that in a previous game he got five strikes in a row. Mollie also comments on aspects of her game play as she gets her own little chair to sit on and positions it in a prime location to observe proceedings. Not sure who won this game as there was no celebrating. (Field notes, Day 3, Kelly family)

While gaming together, older siblings tend to adopt the position of “expert”, introducing their novice siblings to the game (Reich *et al.*, 2013). This does not seem to be happening here, perhaps because *Wii* bowling is uncomplicated enough for a five year old to play or because the age difference is so significant that Declan does not feel the need to assert his position. The observation also reveals that there is an avatar (*Mii*) for every family

member – something that also happened in the other households. Usually avatars are created by the children to facilitate collective gaming and, in particular, to encourage parental involvement (Reich *et al.*, 2013). Finally, we note that both children seem to be equally competitive despite the age and gender differences. They highlight their successes both verbally and in more embodied ways and seem to be enjoying themselves a great deal, something that Mollie later reflects upon:

When I am playing I have fun with my brother or by myself. Or he has fun playing by himself. But we most enjoy it when we are playing together. (Mollie, 5, Student, Kelly family)

Brother–sister gaming also occurred frequently in the Hanlon family between Cian (18) and his younger sister Lucy (14):

Circa 8 p.m. Cian and Lucy begin to play on the *Wii*. They choose to play table tennis. Movements while playing the game are very physical and consistent commentary, discussion and cajoling happens throughout. At one point Lucy is so engrossed in the game that she nearly falls over. Again Lucy wins the game. Cian comments on this in a somewhat dejected tone. They restart the game again. Lucy gives Cian instructions about where he should stand. He ignores her instructions. (Field notes, Day 3, Hanlon family)

Here, we see active gaming in action involving movement, cajoling and commentary. Lucy issues instructions and her brother ignores her. This is typical of brother–sister interactions and helps to build bonds between them. In the case of both families, the *Wii* provides a point of interaction between siblings irrespective of age or gender. While it might be expected that the younger sibling would enjoy the opportunity to interact with their older brothers, it seems that sibling gaming also appealed to teenage boys:

I think Lucy started playing it when we had [...] games she was interested in [...] I sort of encouraged her to play it anyway. It was nice to play against someone, you know what I mean, rather than just playing it with myself. (Cian, 18, student, Hanlon family)

Gaming between siblings happened spontaneously (in contrast to the planned nature of “family” gaming) and is reported by the children in a casual, rather offhand way. As a result, the conventions of “proper” *Wii* gaming are not observed. It deviates from the representation of family in *Wii* advertising and from parenting discourses, especially relating to purposive leisure (Shaw, 2008). But this seems inconsequential to the children because they are simply having fun together. This leisure is affiliative. There is a focus simply on spending time together with no predetermined agenda (Freysinger and Flannery, 1992). Nevertheless, these intrafamilial interactions are important to family life (Duncan and Smith, 2006; Epp and Price, 2008; Buckingham, 2011) and are deserving of more attention.

A great deal of intrafamilial play also occurred in the form of mother–child gaming during observation. Because this only involves one parent, it does not adhere to “family” gaming (thinking back to Amy’s comments) and often goes unacknowledged by both children and their mothers. For example, quite a lot of mother–daughter gaming took place in the Hanlon family during the observation period and occasionally in the Hernandez, Da Souza and Kelly households. Despite this, all four mothers express guilt at not gaming more. Mother–daughter gaming seems to be a positive experience and allows players to step outside their assigned roles within the family. For example, playing the *Wii* with her mother allows Amelia to try out new ways of being and of interacting with her mum:

Amelia is playing on the *Wii*. Amanda enters the room and Amelia asks her if she wants to play. She stays, says she is useless at this game and begins to join in – commenting on proceedings. Amelia sets up a boxing game. This game also requires the use of the nunchuck, so the gamer has nunchuck in one hand and the control in the other. Amelia begins to demonstrate and Amanda

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has to move out of her way while she is playing this. Both Amanda and I go into fits of laughter watching Amelia play. She is hilarious and very animated both physically and verbally. She then asks who wants to play next. Amanda decided to go next and immediately starts to ask questions and seek advice. Amelia is happy to oblige once again. Amelia also changes from her usual quiet self to making comments such as 'beat the crap out of him'. She also shadow boxes alongside her Mum as she plays and is very vocal in her encouragement to her Mum. Amanda even begins to shout at the television screen for the character to 'stay down' but Amelia screams that he is going to get back up. When Amanda does well we all clap and encourage her. Even Amanda throws her arms in the air when she does well. Amanda is struggling a little with the controls. Her language is occasionally choice and again she blames the game, not her game playing. Amelia comes to the rescue and gives her some advice on how to play. Amanda seems to be really enjoying herself. (Field notes, Day 5 Da Souza family)

Amelia enjoys adopting the expert role – offering instructions and advice – often signalling quite strongly what Amanda needs to achieve. More used to playing quietly on her own, Amelia seems to relish the opportunity to play with her mum. Her choice of game – boxing – is also in stark contrast to her usual *Animal Crossing* and she does seem to be trying out a more competitive, aggressive aspect of her personality. In this regard, the gaming experience provides opportunities for learning, challenging boundaries and developing social skills (Shaw, 2008). In turn, Amanda seems happy to accept the novice position and, perhaps as a result, seems to be having fun and really enjoying herself.

### Discussion

The increased emphasis on purposive leisure as a mechanism to facilitate family togetherness and bonding is important for families (Shaw, 2008; Shaw *et al.*, 2008). Togetherness involves more than being in the same space and sharing fun times. It also incorporates family members learning about themselves and each other, teaching moral lessons and encouraging an appreciation of the importance of family (Shaw and Dawson, 2001). It is no surprise then that parents are encouraged to organise leisure activities “in order to enhance interpersonal relationships among family members and to promote a sense of unity and cohesion” (Shaw *et al.*, 2008, p. 14). Often occurring outside the home – walks in nature and trips to the cinema – such leisure activities involve a significant expenditure of time (in planning and participation) that is rarely available for working parents. Thus, the opportunity to experience family togetherness *within* the home through *Wii* gaming seems very attractive to families. Functioning in much the same way as the traditional board game, the *Wii* offers “a powerful and appealing recuperation of traditional family values in the fast-moving context of new media” (McIntosh *et al.*, 2011, p. 186) for twenty-first-century families. It is no surprise then that family members evaluate the console not only in terms of its entertainment value but also in terms of how it supports or undermines their experience of togetherness.

Mothers, fathers and children suggest that when they played the *Wii* like the family in the ad (i.e. whole family collective gaming), they did experience *togetherness* and its positive associations. Mothers are particularly interested in the opportunity to have fun together while fathers tend to be more concerned with the opportunities for interaction and learning that gaming invoked. Children, in contrast, are unaware of the requirements of purposive leisure and are simply happy to have their parents' attention and involvement.

Families internalise a “proper” way to play the *Wii* and the experience of togetherness though whole family collective gaming. This suggests that family togetherness is understood to only be possible when *all* family members *choose* to spend their *leisure time* together (Shaw, 2008). Rooted in a nostalgic view of the family of past eras (Coontz, 1992), the ideology of togetherness fosters aspirational ideas of how families should be.

Increasingly, this ideology portrays leisure time as action-oriented and supportive of family togetherness (Ribbens-McCarthy, 2012). Parents are held responsible for their children's success in life, and engagement in purposive leisure is seen as central in the demonstration of familiness to family members and others (Obrador, 2012). These, of course, are myths. There are many ways to be a family, and family is experienced even in the mundane activity of *Wii* gaming. However, family members often only recognise the significance of activities that reflect representations within advertising and the media. As a result, they only recognise togetherness when all family members engage in *Wii* gaming, but not when gaming occurs between family configurations that do not involve the "whole" family. Nonetheless, not all family members participate in every gaming opportunity. While families do want to spend time together, individual family members also have their own interests. In this study, fathers and children were largely unapologetic regarding the pursuit of their own interests, while mothers tended to put others' needs ahead of their own. Still, various configurations of intrafamilial gameplay occurred regularly. Although such configurations diverge from the *ideal*, it is evident that they still facilitate family togetherness and bonding. Sibling-sibling gaming happens fairly casually. It is just for fun but is particularly significant because it facilitates shared experiences and strengthens sibling bonds (Coynne *et al.*, 2016). Thus, gaming between various family members provides opportunities for *relational* bonding and togetherness in a relatively accessible and comfortable environment. Whole family collective gaming, even in the context of the family home and in the presence of a domestic technology intended to facilitate togetherness, occurred far more rarely. Idealistic notions of togetherness are nostalgic, calling out to an imagined past, evoking a bygone era when maybe the family really were all together (Langford *et al.*, 2001). It seems then that the ideal of togetherness and its production on the ground through various relational configurations are slightly at odds.

Rather than challenging idealised notions of togetherness, however, families who do not achieve this goal through their engagement with the *Wii* experience a sense of failure. Thus, the search for family togetherness through shared leisure pursuits, although synonymous with positive values, can also result in negative experiences (Daly, 2001). Children are left disappointed, mothers guilty and fathers disapprove. Parents excuse their reduced involvement in *Wii* gaming through recourse to time poverty and work and domestic responsibilities (Shaw, 2008). For their part, children attribute the reduction in whole family gaming to the unavailability of their parents, regardless of whether their parents actually played.

It is interesting to note that while fathers and mothers both recognise their failure to perform family togetherness through the *Wii*, fathers experience the failure rather differently to the mothers in the study. Despite highlighting the potential of the *Wii* to support family togetherness, fathers tended to blame the presence of the *Wii* and other technological devices on children's failure to engage. In reality, they were the ones who chose not to game, choosing instead to pursue their own hobbies and interests when they had completed work and domestic responsibilities. Moreover, they were generally unrepentant in doing so. This seems to be because the demands of parenthood are less onerous for fathers than they are for mothers. Indeed, the discourse of involved fatherhood only requires that fathers help out with the care of their children and develop emotional connections with them (Marsiglio *et al.*, 2005). In contrast, mothers tend to be more concerned with the amount of time they spend with their children. Within the discourse of intensive mothering, women are encouraged to put the needs of their children ahead of their own (Shairani *et al.*, 2012; Bettany *et al.*, 2014; Del Bucchia and Peñaloza, 2016). Still, mothers continue to underestimate their participation in purposive leisure activities and overestimate

its importance. Consequently, they experience guilt and reduce engagement in what might be understood as “me time”. Indeed, it seems that for women, anxiety about having too much to do and guilt about not using time according to the nagging “shoulds” of family responsibilities are standard fare (Brown and Warner-Smith, 2005): “Family leisure, therefore, compounds the heavy workload experienced by many mothers, adding to their other family and household responsibilities, and to the paid work responsibilities of employed mothers” (Shaw, 2008, p. 697). Contemporary working mothers experience guilt if they fail to participate in their children’s numerous activities and experience stress and exhaustion if they do (Shaw, 2008). This paradox, however, should be considered in the context of research that suggests that in industrialised countries, mothers (both employed and stay-at-home) have increased rather than decreased time spent with their children (Sayer *et al.*, 2004; Gauthier *et al.*, 2004). Thus, it seems that while family leisure activity is increasingly regarded as “a commitment and a responsibility of parenthood” (Shaw, 2008, p. 696), mothers continue to disproportionately take this on as an additional obligation. Shaw *et al.* (2008) express different levels of parental engagement in terms of mothers needing to “be there for” their children, while fathers simply need to “be with”. This is deserving of further consideration and demonstrates that the discourse of intensive motherhood is far more demanding for women than the discourse of involved fatherhood is for men (Shaw, 2008). It also highlights the potential of marketing, advertising and the wider media to reinforce and/or subvert these dominant ideologies.

Similarly, the tendency to represent family as a whole or collective within the media fails to reflect the diversity of experiences of what it means to be a family. The collective family can also be experienced within different configurations or clusters of intrafamilial interactions. Family relationships can be expressed as relations of consanguinity (sibling-sibling), marriage (partner-partner) and/or lineage (parent-child). These clusters of relations can be configured and reconfigured in the experience, expression and performance of family, and we see these different variations within different families in the study. Therefore, advertising that eschews collective and idealised representations of family togetherness and that reflects opportunities for personal and relational development is to be particularly welcomed. This will reduce the dissonance between promises, expectations and realised experiences. Representing more achievable images and aims of family togetherness through different configurations of family interaction – perhaps involved with different activities and at different times – will help families experience, and recognise, more togetherness. Ultimately, if through marketing and advertising we can remove some of the ideological demands of togetherness, then families are more likely to recognise their experiences of togetherness in the various mundane interactions they experience with other family members. These relational interactions are likely to be configured and reconfigured depending on the activity at hand (watching TV, playing the *Wii*, eating a meal, climbing a mountain, etc.), as well as different interest in that activity and competing demands on the time of family members. In this way, various clusters of family interactions are configured and reconfigured both sequentially and simultaneously, and family togetherness is performed and experienced “on the go”. Given cultural expectations that parents are responsible for their children’s success in life (Shaw *et al.*, 2008), we are likely to see dramatic growth in sectors that might be accessed for purposive leisure. Examples include “edutaining” experiences at museums and art galleries and outdoor experiences that provide opportunities for personal growth and intrafamilial bonding. Thus, a whole host of new research contexts exists to explore the interaction between families and consumption.

Families evolve and change over time. The contemporary family is increasingly likely to incorporate a diversity of structures and characteristics from single parent families to same-

sex families. They also involve individuals with different needs and different demands that cannot be captured with a myopic focus on the traditional family as a collective. Future research should interrogate the *representation* of family in marketing and advertising and explore, in particular, the impact of advertising that challenges dominant and idealised representations. Future research should also explore how configurations of family interactions that deviate from idealised notions of the collective contribute to family togetherness and bonding and inform contemporary understandings of what family means. The interplay between individual, intrafamilial and collective family experiences is deserving of special attention. The relative demands of contemporary parenting ideologies, how they are reflected and reinforced in marketing and advertising and how they impact mothers and fathers in very different ways, are certainly of concern.

Family togetherness is a useful and important lens through which to study family interaction because it is clearly something that is important to families themselves. It also aligns with contemporary discourses of intensive mothering and involved fathering and explains the pursuit of purposive leisure. For marketers such as *Nintendo*, such ideologies can come to impact product design, positioning and strategy. In this paper, we highlight that engaging more critically and interrogating rather than simply reiterating idealised discourses may allow marketers to improve design and marketing in ways that enhance rather than challenge family life.

### Conclusions

*Nintendo's* positioning strategy meant that *Wii* gaming transformed into an acceptable family leisure activity (McIntosh *et al.*, 2011), “that was perceived as useful for personal development, stress relief, exercise and family bonding” (Sloan, 2011, p. 160). *Nintendo* explicitly developed their family-centred orientation through the product design, marketing and game content. As a result, gaming was domesticated as family-oriented purposive leisure (McIntosh *et al.*, 2011), providing opportunities for “family togetherness” (Chambers, 2012b). Togetherness is desired by contemporary families, but it often understood in nostalgic and idealised ways. This ideal remains aspirational, proves elusive and is largely unsustainable for most families, despite spending more time together as a family than previous generations (Sayer *et al.*, 2004; Gauthier *et al.*, 2004). Paradoxically, failure to experience and perform family togetherness renders it more desirable to family members and, in particular, mothers.

Contemporary understandings of family togetherness appear resistant to radical change and tend to be uncritically accepted and universally desired. Collectively, the core attributes thought to characterise family togetherness include whole family engagement, freedom of choice, commitment, motivation and the appropriateness, quality and/or enjoyment of the experience (Obrador, 2012; Chambers, 2012b). Ultimately, we see that the current notion of family togetherness, through consumption activities and artefacts such as the *Wii*, proves too challenging for our families in the long term. Similar to Chambers (2012b), we find the current concept of family togetherness to be prescriptive. Grounding conceptualisations of family togetherness in some nostalgic view of the past (Coontz, 1992) limits an examination of multiple meanings and experiences and the complex dimensions of family life itself (Daly, 2001). In this regard, our data highlight the potential for consumption to support collective, intrafamilial and individual satisfaction. Interrogating the ebb and flow of family interactions around the *Wii* over time allowed us to explore how it functioned as “a joining and dismantling power in the nexus of family ties” (Ekström, 2007, p. 204).

Finally, togetherness was recognised and experienced when it adhered to representations of family gaming in *Wii* advertising. In contrast, it was not recognised (but may have been

experienced) within other configurations of family members gaming. Marketing and advertising continues to reinforce simplistic and idealistic representations of family (Borgerson *et al.*, 2006; Spigel, 2013), and these are often deliberated upon by family members in the evaluation of their everyday lives. Thus, marketers and advertisers that recognise and reflect greater diversity in family would facilitate greater appreciation of the ambiguous, asymmetrical and negotiated nature of family life. Marketers need to be more critical of how togetherness is experienced, performed and realised by families such that it can be used to enhance product design, positioning and marketing strategy, providing them with opportunities to engage family members, to communicate with and about families and to explore how to be part of relevant and meaningful family conversations.

### Notes

1. Although not intended to be reflective of the diversity of family structures that are possible today, there are examples of nuclear, second and blended families within the study.
2. Frequently refers to gaming for several hours often on a daily basis. Rarely refers to gaming for several hours once or twice a month.

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