

I Am Thou, Thou Art I: Persona 5: The Royal's: Representation of Post-Traumatic Growth Through Social Penetration Theory

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Abstract: In the Shin Megami Tensei series – Persona, one of the most prevalent themes that exists within the gameplay is the social link system. The protagonist creates friendships over the course of the narrative and deepens the bond with friends with increased interactions. As the number of interactions increase, so does the depth of the conversation.

This study investigates the following objectives: 1) analyze how social interactions are presented in an in-game medium by means of social penetration, 2) determine how trauma is presented in Persona 5: The Royal and show how it is communicated as the relationship deepens, and 3) investigate frequencies of interactions between the protagonist and NPC's as they demonstrate a coping mechanism through the means of post-traumatic growth.

This case study will content analyze through the lens of coding categories such as Social Penetration Theory and the Post Traumatic Growth Index. Using these coding categories, authors will quantitatively analyze all confidant interactions through 10 levels of individual conversations increasing in depth. A content analysis was used to investigate these in-game themes.

Using frequencies and Chi Square analysis, *Affective* stage and *Stable* stage from social penetration was the most frequent amongst the interactions, and while various trauma was present, *Relating to Others* was most prominent as the relationships deepened.

The depths of interaction and coping through trauma was found to be quite similar to real world interactions and growing past trauma as a person relies on friends and family, and focuses on the future. These themes can be used to explain post traumatic growth, and could be utilized to empathize with clients who might be struggling with their own trauma.

Keywords: Social Penetration Theory, Post Traumatic Growth, Persona 5: The Royal, Social Links, JRPG Genre.

INTRODUCTION

The Shin Megami Tensei Series: Persona 5: The Royal (P5R) has become a worldwide phenomenon in digital gaming genre of Japanese role-playing games (JRPGs). It is the fifth instalment of the Persona series and an expansion from the original game. P5R features dark and disturbing themes with mythological references and settings; many of the characters experience significant psychological trauma as the game progresses, from witnessing a peer suicide attempt to experiencing varying types of abuse. The main storyline is about a group of high school students that form a vigilante coalition (called the Phantom Thieves) and fight for justice. All of the Phantom Thieves members join the group after disclosing or realizing an experience of trauma they have individually suffered.

The series includes the eponymous "Personas," which grant the high school characters special powers

to battle enemies in an alternate world (known in Persona 5 as the "metaverse"). Additionally, the game follows many of the common tropes within the Persona series. These tropes include a blended semi-defined protagonist, who is a player-controlled and player-named character whose actions the player decides upon, but whose appearance, gender, and general demeanour are beyond the player's control.

Contextually, there is a similar theme amongst relationship development in JRPGs. Throughout the course of storytelling in the gaming medium, JRPGs have centered upon imperfect characters strengthening their relationships as they progress through a long and perilous adventure. As JRPGs have evolved, so have the methods of strengthening interactions between protagonists and non-player characters (NPCs). Some gaming narratives have included romance options, individual quests, and even social gatherings as means to influencing and strengthening interpersonal relationships; by increasing the nuances of relationship development, the narratives become more relatable for the player (Caravalla, 2016). Since Persona 3, the game series features an additional life simulator where

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the protagonist creates social links (known as confidants in *Persona 5* and *P5R*) with members of the Phantom Thieves and with others who interact with the player character unrelated to the in-game missions. All of these social links can help the party with equipment, statistical boosts, and perks in battle. Other games have approached an alphabetical and numeric system of deepening relationships (e.g., *Stardew Valley* (Chucklefish); *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* (Intelligent Systems); and *Octopath Traveler* (Square Enix)). However, *Persona* has ten interactions per non-playable character (NPC) and is well known for their increasing depths of interaction. As the protagonist communicates with the confidants, the interactions become increasingly in-depth on a numeric scale from 1 (least personal) to 10 (most personal). These interactions are mostly optional, but they are instrumental to character development among NPC's storylines.

Persona 5 addresses several new themes within the narrative that are exclusive to the series. Namely, the *Persona* games revolve around accepting one's inner self that people oftentimes deny (Atlas). *Persona 5* additionally deepens psychological connections within the shared experience of trauma. The vast majority of the player's confidants have experienced significant trauma at some point in the in-game relationship. Whether the trauma is endured midway through the relationship, or is the foundation of the relationship, it is clear that the characters exhibit great trust in the protagonist and seek to grow past their trauma. This manuscript looks to not only analyse how *Persona 5: The Royal* addresses personal trauma and post-traumatic growth, but also to illustrate how the game addresses relationships through Social Penetration Theory.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Penetration Theory

From a socially normative perspective, the unspoken expectations around interpersonal disclosures are important in creating meaningful relationships with others. If a disclosure violates social norms because it is shared in the wrong place or at the wrong time, it leads to unfavourable perceptions of the individual who made the disclosure (Altman & Taylor, 1973), including situations when personal information is shared with a stranger in a public place (Archer & Berg, 1978). Relationships also take root in self-disclosure. Within personal and cultural norms, individuals decide

how much they should share about personal information about themselves and how comfortable they are listening to others.

As individuals communicate with others, there is a perceived increase in depth of conversations and subjects explained (See Figure 1). Altman & Taylor (1973) developed a model to help explain different stages of interaction based on how personal information is shared with other people. They examined how willing individuals are to disclose personal information as people spend time together. Social Penetration Theory (SPT) has been beneficial in helping explain friendships (Berg, 1984), romantic relationships (Honeycutt, 1986; Horne & Johnson, 2018), breakups (Altman & Taylor, 1973), and even within therapeutic practice (Farber, 2003). As an example, SPT has been explained by a metaphor of an onion as you peel back layers to get to deeper conversations and trust within the relationship, and it is categorized by 5 stages

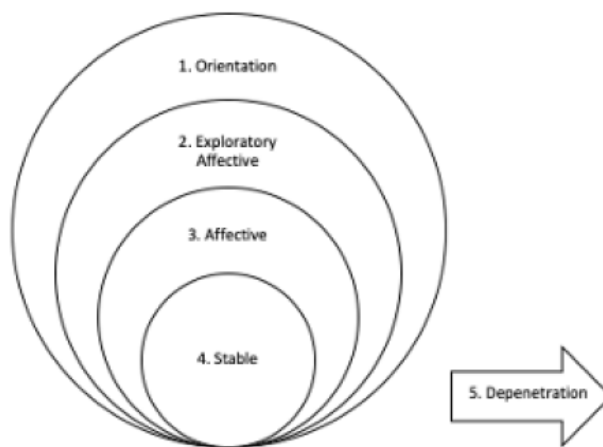


Figure 1: Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973).

In an effort to give context to the stages of social penetration, *P5R* examples will be used. First, the Orientation stage begins with small talk and cliché conversations. Oftentimes, the characters are talking about basic demographics; *Persona* has multiple characters who state "I hope we get *a/ong!*" as a positive entry point into the relationship. Second is the Exploratory Affective stage, categorized by characters expressing opinions about broad topics (e.g., politics, sports, music, fashion, etc.) but withholding personal information. Some confidants in *P5R* will ask about grades, if you are dating anyone, or other similar topics. Third, the Affective stage is when individuals begin to disclose personal matters and offer criticism about choices. Due to sharing traumatic events with the

protagonist, many confidants in P5R are open to share personal stories about their family, other trauma, and even disagree with the player's choices.

Fourth, the Stable stage refers to the plateau of a relationship where a person's deepest thoughts, attitudes, values, and beliefs are shared. Moreover, they can anticipate how the other will react in certain interactions, which means this stage contains full social openness. Typically, in P5R, many confidants express their long-term commitment and their realization that they can tell the protagonist that "I can tell you anything" (a frequent line throughout the series). Lastly is the stage of Depenetration, which refers to the perceived cost disclosure outweighing the benefits, thus terminating the relationship. While rare in the Persona series, there are examples of depenetration in Persona 3. Players of the game can engage in a social link that leads to a confrontation, thus breaking the bond and any subsequent interactions. The social link will then reject any additional conversation. Depenetration is not present in Persona 5: The Royal, so it will not be featured in this study.

Trauma

Trauma is considered to be a response that overwhelms an individual's ability to process a difficult or distressing event (*i.e.*, psychological, physical, emotional, etc.) (APA, 2013; van der Kolk, 2000). These emotional responses can be any life event like an animal attack, a car accident, or the loss of a loved one. Additionally, the event can be directly or indirectly experienced by a person in order to be classified as traumatic (APA, 2013; WHO, 2016). More recently, trauma has been appraised to be thought as an individual's experience of an event rather than the event occurrence itself (Karatzias & Levendosky, 2019; Shapiro, 2012). Furthermore, what may be considered to be traumatic for one person could be deemed exciting or adventurous by another, thus, not inducing trauma symptoms (Karatzias & Levendosky, 2019; van der Kolk, 2000; Shapiro, 2012).

Trauma symptoms vary with the type of traumatic event, the severity of the incident, the possibility of multiple co-occurring traumas, the perceived psychological, emotional, and physical impact, and even the psychological and emotional effects that occur for the individual even after the event has concluded (APA, 2013; WHO, 2016). The symptomatology of trauma varies not just for the diagnostic criteria, but also for the individual as people experience these

events differently which affects how the person will respond to the stressor (APA, 2013; van der Kolk, 2000; WHO, 2016). As a result, there are numerous categories of traumatic events (*i.e.*, assault, abuse, accidents, neglect, world events, natural disasters, etc.) that can occur and be experienced, potentially resulting in a diagnosis of trauma. The distinction of whether an event is experienced as traumatic is what determines whether the individual becomes engulfed by it or moves beyond it (Maack *et al.*, 2015).

Generally, when an individual becomes emotionally overwhelmed by a traumatic event, they are put into a fight, flight or freeze state of existence. For those who are able to manage their emotional reactions and can move past the fight, flight, or freeze states of being, growth from trauma is possible (Kozłowska *et al.*, 2015; Maack *et al.*, 2015). This creates a posttraumatic growth state of personality change and has transformational roles in overcoming the trauma and integrating the event into future encounters for psychological benefit (Park *et al.*, 1996).

Post Traumatic Growth

Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG) is a clinical phrase used to describe the positive psychological changes that occur as people who have suffered traumatic experiences heal and challenge their assumptions about their lives prior to the trauma (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). PTG is specifically understood through the lens of constructivism in psychology, where each individual has their own structured understanding of who they are, their future, and what experiences mean about themselves and others (Tedeschi, Shakespeare-Finch, Taku, & Calhoun, 2018). Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) developed five different variables to help exemplify PTG in their own specific categories.

First, Relating to Others emphasizes how individuals put forth more effort into their relationships. For example, a realization that "relationships are to be treasured", or a character declaring how they could not move on without you could all be considered relating to others. Second, New Possibilities refers to new paths of life or interests following trauma. Common examples would include a character expressing what they are able to achieve now that the burden is behind them, or trying something new in relation to newfound identity. The third category is Personal Strength, which refers to having greater self-reliance and efficacy; also, a person realizing that they can handle new difficulties. An example is a Persona character realizing their trauma

and how they've grown. Dialogue stating "I will become even stronger" exemplifies greater self-reliance. The fourth category concerns Appreciation of Life, which refers to changing priorities and valuing one's life. Especially with confidants dealing with failure, a near death experience, death of a loved one, or contemplation of self-harm, confidants sometimes express how they have changed and left a past self behind them. Lastly, Spiritual Change refers to a better understanding and growth through spiritual matters or guidance. While rare in JRPGs, there are some instances where a character will take refuge in a deity, a specific dogma, or a higher force to help move past previous trauma (e.g., *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* (Intelligent Systems) and *Persona 5: The Royal* (P5R; Atlus)).

RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

The aim of this overview is 1) analyze how social interactions are presented in an in-game medium by means of social penetration, 2) determine how trauma is presented in *Persona 5: The Royal* and show how it is communicated as the relationship deepens, and 3) investigate frequencies of interactions between the protagonist and NPC's as they demonstrate a coping mechanism through the means of post-traumatic growth. The following research questions indicate how this manuscript looks to analyze, SPT, PTG, and trauma in *Persona 5: The Royal* (Atlus).

RQ1: How does *Persona 5: The Royal* present Social Penetration Theory through its confidant stages?

RQ2: How does *Persona 5: The Royal* present Post Traumatic Growth through its confidant stages?

METHODS

This study involved the content analysis of a population of in-game interactions with NPC's that were featured in the game *Persona 5: The Royal* (Atlus). Two researchers coded for 21 NPCs, and each NPC had 10 interactions (n = 210) independently with increasing depth of disclosure to the protagonist. Within the sample, 12 characters were adolescents either attending middle school or high school (n = 120), and 9 characters were adult figures that hired the protagonist at their place of business (n = 90).

As *Persona 5* renamed their Social Links as "Confidants", one on one communication with the protagonist were included in the sample as this is where NPCs disclosed their trauma. They confided in

the protagonist to express their hardships. Moreover, they also shared their goals with the protagonist privately, thus increasing frequency of PTG. Group dialogues were not included in this sample as confidant lines were often inconsistent as the story progressed.

All characters that were included within the sample had to be considered real in-game characters, and not ones that exclusively exist in the Metaverse (e.g., Igor and Lavensa). Moreover, the NPC confidants had to experience some sort of trauma either before the interactions or during. Although NPCs within the game communicate their trauma throughout the game, this study investigated exclusively one on one interactions with the protagonist and the confidant to ensure consistency with all characters. Researchers pulled transcripts of all NPC interactions through a YouTube search and coded the videos of all interactions within the game.

Within the coding sheet, researchers numerically identified each NPC along with the ten interactions. Also, several theoretical components were analysed within the coding sheet. While several categories had the potential to be present within the interaction, coders focused on the most dominant frame within each coding category. First, researchers looked at coding categories regarding social penetration (Altman & Taylor, 1973). These categories included: orientation, exploratory affective, affective, stable, and depenetration. This was completed to determine if social penetration was present as the NPC's shared more information as the level of relationship deepened.

Second, since *Persona 5: The Royal* is centered on overcoming trauma; sixteen subcategories of trauma from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V) (APA, 2013) were included within the sample. Categories included: sexual violence, physical violence, abduction, torture, natural disaster, accident (human made), inappropriate sexual experience (without violence), domestic violence, medical catastrophe, unnatural death, neglect, isolation, frequent guardian transitions, unstable parent figure, verbal abuse, and social distress (e.g. bullying, stress from discrimination). Additionally, passive and active trauma was included in the coding process. Some NPC's have already experienced trauma before the confidant interactions begin, while others experience trauma that are tied directly to the confidant story line. Lastly, researchers coded for PTG within the interactions to help determine how NPCs coped and

moved forward. Coders determined whether PTG was present or absent. If present, researchers utilized the five categories of PTG from Cormio *et al.*, (2013) including: relating to others, new possibilities, personal strength, appreciation of life, and spiritual change. Coders used the most dominant category of growth within the interaction.

Since all of the coding categories were assigned to a designated numeric value, researchers used nominal scale coding. (Scott, 1955). This included the previously mentioned coding categories of confidant, social penetration stage, the trauma present, trauma subtype, and the type of PTG. All confidant interactions were coded through a coding sheet featuring these coding categories.

The researchers conducted a content analysis and separated each interaction into two individual social links out of ten¹ into 20% intervals (Daniel & Westerman, 2017). All social links have ten interactions that increase in depth. Therefore, this study wanted to investigate how the conversations deepen as the social link progressed. Researchers paired interactions together to demonstrate a longitudinal approach concerning how much conversations deepened from stage to stage.

Both coders were trained with a coding sheet and book to code for the previously mentioned categories. Coders were instructed to select the most dominant frame within the coding category of SPT and PTG within the discourse of the interaction. Once reaching agreement on the definitions and coding categories, the researchers coded for the same 15% of the interactions ($n = 32$) to test reliability. A random number generator selected the interactions to be coded, and the authors presented their results to each other. Cohen's Kappa was calculated to determine reliability of the individual coding categories and the overall coding reliability of all coding categories (McHugh, 2012)

Once coded, all data was transferred from an excel file to SPSS software for data analysis. Frequency data was recorded to determine the presence of each category of social penetration and post traumatic growth. Social penetration was recorded by frequency

to exemplify the depth of the relationship and how it corresponded with each social link stage (See Figure 2). Moreover, chi square tests were conducted to determine if expected and observed values (See Tables 1 and 2) were statistically significant (Kerlinger & Lee, 2000) In order to assess significance, expected value were assessed by z tables and their respective p values (Boslough, 2008) were reported based on social penetration and post traumatic growth frequencies (See Tables 1 and 2)

RESULTS

With regards to coding, all character social links ($n = 210$) were compiled together and grouped into progressively deepening interactions ($n = 42$) per stage. All confidant social links were compiled into stages for two reasons. First, breaking up the confidant social links into five stages mirrors the five stages of social penetration. Second, the breakdown of the stages in this fashion creates a research design that segments of 20% ($n = 42$) that are labelled as stages that reflect interactions as they become more in-depth. There was high agreement in all categories including social penetration presence ($k = 1.000$, $p < .001$), social penetration type ($k = .919$, $p < .001$), trauma presence ($k = .931$, $p < .001$), trauma type ($k = .881$, $p < .001$), posttraumatic growth presence ($k = .906$, $p < .001$), and posttraumatic growth type ($k = .866$, $p < .001$). Overall reliability was also high ($k = .900$, $p < .001$), allowing the two coders to proceed with the rest of the interactions within the sample ($n = 210$).

RQ1: we evaluated both SPT and the presence or absence of trauma. In the Exploratory Affective stage (Stage 1), Trauma was found to be more primarily absent ($n = 26$) than present ($n = 16$). The Affective stages (Stages 2-4) found that confidants became increasingly more likely to express their trauma to the protagonist, as stages 3-4 yielded more presence in communicating trauma then not. The Stable stage (Stage 5) saw a reversal back to a primary absence in communicating trauma ($n = 24$) as opposed to communicating their trauma ($n = 17$). However, as PTG is highly present in the Stable stage, the confidants might not feel as much need to communicate their trauma. Moreover, the interactions were broken up into groups of 20% ($n = 42$) to mirror social penetration theory. Each stage of interaction was used to examine trends and relative frequencies in these categories as interactions deepened. Also, the distributions of the frequencies for each of the stages mentioned were compared using chi-square distribution analyses.

¹ Stage 1: (Interaction Depth 1 and 2), Stage 2: (Interaction Depth 3 and 4), Stage 3: (Interaction Depth 5 and 6), Stage 4: (Interaction Depth 7 and 8), and Stage 5: (Interaction Depth 9 and 10)

Table 1: Social Penetration by Frequency

Social Penetration	Orientation (%)	Exploratory Affective (%)	Affective (%)	Stable (%)	Depenetration (%)	Total (%)
Stage 1	13 (57%)	19 (50%)	10 (10%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	42 (100%)
x^2	.595	6.881	-.024	0.0	0.0	0
Stage 2	5 (22%)	11 (29%)	24 (29%)	2 (4%)	0 (0%)	42 (100%)
x^2	2.881	.024	17.357	-6.881	0.0	0
Stage 3	2 (9%)	6 (16%)	31 (32%)	3 (6%)	0 (0%)	42 (100%)
x^2	-6.881	-1.929	40.024	-5.357	0.0	0
Stage 4	2 (9%)	1 (3%)	24 (25%)	12 (23%)	0 (0%)	42 (100%)
x^2	-6.881	-8.595	17.357	.214	0.0	0
Stage 5	1 (4%)	1 (3%)	4 (4%)	36 (68%)	0 (0%)	42 (100%)
x^2	8.592	-8.595	-4.024	61.929	0.0	0
Total	23 (11%)	38 (18%)	96 (46%)	53 (25%)	0 (0%)	210 (100%)
x^2	25.833	26.024	78.786	74.381	0	0
p	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	n/a	n/a

Table 2: Post Traumatic Growth by Frequency

PTG	Relate to Others (%)	New Possibilities (%)	Personal Strength (%)	Appreciation of Life (%)	Spiritual Change (%)	Total Present (%)
Stage 1	2 (3.6%)	5 (16.1%)	3 (13%)	1 (12.5%)	0 (0%)	11 (100%)
x^2	-4.8761	-1.376	-3.471	-6.519	0.0	0
Stage 2	7 (12.7%)	6 (19.3%)	4 (17.4%)	1 (12.5%)	0 (0%)	18 (100%)
x^2	-.233	-.688	-2.305	-6.519	0.0	0
Stage 3	16 (17.6%)	6 (19.3%)	3 (13%)	1 (12.5%)	0 (0%)	26 (100%)
x^2	6.876	-.688	-3.471	-6.519	0.0	0
Stage 4	14 (25.4%)	4 (12.9%)	9 (39.1%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	27 (100%)
x^2	3.733	-2.304	.043	0.0	0.0	0
Stage 5	16 (17.6%)	10 (32.2%)	4 (17.4%)	5 (62.5%)	2 (100%)	37 (100%)
x^2	6.876	.305	-2.305	-1.376	-4.876	0
Total	55 (26.2%)	31 (14.8%)	23 (10.9%)	8 (3.8%)	2 (0.9%)	119 (100%)
x^2	22.595	5.357	11.59	20.933	4.874	0
p	<.001	.245	.021	<.001	.300	n/a

Within the first interaction stage, Exploratory Affective was the most dominant coding category ($n = 19$), with Orientation being the second most dominant ($n = 13$) - neither of which achieved significance. Stages two through four demonstrated that the Affective stage was most dominant (e.g. Stage 2: $x^2(4, n = 24) = 17.357, p > .001$, Stage 3: $x^2(4, N = 31) = 40.024, p > .001$., Stage 4: $x^2(4, N = 24) = 17.357, p > .001$). Lastly, Stage 5 differed significantly as the Stable stage became the most dominant segment $x^2(4, N = 36) = 61.929, p > .001$). Therefore, as the confidant social links deepened, so did the depth of interaction and relationship stability within the in-game story.

RQ2: the frequencies of PTG were reported. Confidants within the interactions were more likely to communicate PTG with the protagonist ($n = 119, 57.5\%$) than unwilling to communicate ($n = 88, 42.5\%$). The most dominant example of PTG was Relating to Others ($n = 55, 46.2\%$); New Possibilities was second most frequent ($n = 31, 26.1\%$); followed by Personal Strength ($n = 23, 19.3\%$), Appreciation of Life ($n = 7,$

5.9%), and Spiritual Change ($n = 3, 2.5\%$). We evaluated the categories of PTG and SPT within the stages within the research design created. The only category that yielded significant results above the expected frequencies was Relating to Others during Stage 3, $x^2(5, n = 16) = 6.876, p > .001$ and Stage 5, $x^2(5, n = 16) = 6.876, p > .001$. Moreover, The Exploratory Affective stages did not yield many instances of PTG, therefore it was rarely communicated. Although within the Exploratory Affective stage, New Possibilities was most frequent ($n = 5$). Throughout the Affective and Stable stages, Relating to Others was found to be the most communicated PTG category.

DISCUSSION

Considering all the dialogue that occurs within Persona 5: The Royal, the pattern of interactions analysed from the game has significant findings that reveal the in-game communication amongst confidants. Moreover, PTG did appear to be one way that confidants were willing to disclose personal information to the protagonist. Lastly, the meeting of characters

and professional roles were variables that help explain a confidant's willingness to divulge information.

As millions of people play video games, it makes sense to refer to them as teachable tools and also methods of storytelling (Duggan, 2015). If their clients were interested in the medium, being able to use these examples in-game could be a discussion piece that clinicians could discuss with their clients. Moreover, video game characters are becoming increasingly prominent and discussed (Galbraith, 2013). Discussing fictional characters that have similar experiences to a client can be therapeutic when an individual is coping with their own trauma (Bean, Daniel, Hays, 2020).

RQ1 refers to how social penetration relates to the in-game dialogue and how willing confidants are willing to disclose information. RQ1 was supported, as many of the confidants became increasingly willing to open up to the protagonist about the trauma they experienced. As interactions progress, so too does the strength of the relationship from superficial to intimate (West, 2013). The Exploratory Affective stage ($n = 38$) was the most dominant theme in the first stage of confidant depth, primarily because many confidants were reserved with disclosure and made friendly chat with the protagonist. Phrases like "I hope we *get along*" were mentioned by several confidants in their first interactions, and were considered normal (Allensworth, 1996). However, the Orientation ($n = 13$) and Affective ($n = 10$) themes were also present within the first friendship stage. Many of the instances with Orientation centered around older confidants that acted as employers to the protagonists, therefore the older confidants rarely disclosed personal information early. The Affective stage was also present, mainly because many of the Phantom Thieves party members experienced significant trauma before the confidant interactions even began. Moreover, the protagonist was often already aware of the trauma they experienced. As the friendship stages progressed, the Affective stage became the most dominant theme within confidant stages two through four. Confidants were much more willing to disclose private information to the protagonist (West, 2013). Prompts from the game would mirror these interactions by saying "I can feel this person's increasing trust in me" to further validate the confidant's deepening relationship. Lastly, the Stable stage was significantly present in friendship stage 5 as this indicated full trust with the protagonist. Confidants usually display more trust and positive communication around the stable stage as trust continues to grow. Positive communication from both patients and therapists lead to more positive outcomes

towards their therapeutic relationship (Simonds & Spokes, 2017). Phrases like "If you need anything, I will be there for you" are frequent within the fifth stage. Lastly, within the fifth confidant stage, female confidants will express dialogue that hint at romantic feelings that the protagonist can endorse or decline. The romantic relationship lines add some dialogue to the tenth interaction and further emphasize complete trust, but also romantic love, for the protagonist. It should be noted that Depenetration was not present in any interaction; this is because the rhetoric of confidant interactions is to emphasize growth through friendship instead of terminating a relationship.

RQ1 explored SPT but related it back to the presence or absence of trauma disclosure. In the Exploratory Affective stage (Stage 1), Trauma was found to be primarily absent ($n = 26$). The primary reason is because many confidants have not experienced their trauma or do not feel comfortable disclosing it to the protagonist. So, while there might be active trauma, some confidants will only share information regarding hobbies or work.

The Affective stages (Stages 2-4) found increasing likelihood of expressing trauma, mainly because this is when they were experiencing their hardships - or they felt more comfortable expressing it. The way in which characters expressed trauma took many forms; some characters relayed the way traumatic experiences unfolded verbally, while others identified that an incident occurred and that it has impacted them in particular ways (Briere & Scott, 2015). The latter method of sharing was typically expressed to the player character as a way to point out how their relationship is helping the character begin to feel better, or to identify ways the characters felt limited during the challenges the characters must overcome for the story of the game.

Lastly, the Stable stage (Stage 5) focused more on an absence ($n = 24$), or the relief from the aftermath of trauma. The reasoning behind this absence is primarily because most of the confidants have moved past their trauma during the fifth stage. The protagonist had helped the confidant through the tribulation and thus they had the ability to move on and grow from the hardship. This is similar to how trauma is processed in real life through personal networks of confidants. Individuals do not talk about their trauma unless they are comfortable with the person they might tell (Bridges, 2001). One has to gain trust in the real world in order to delve deeper into relationships and learn more about another individual. Just as the trauma was

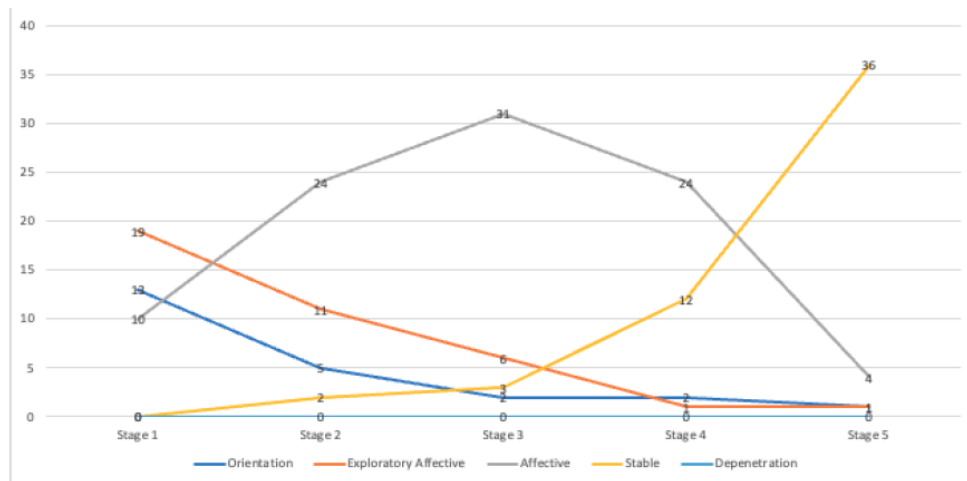


Figure 2: Social penetration by stage.

processed more efficiently in the game when the depth of the relationship increased (as a relationship continues to deepen) humans process traumas in a similar manner requiring deeper connections.

RQ2 evaluated SPT as well, but instead focused on the growth past trauma. As expected, the Exploratory Affective stage saw confidants were less likely to communicate PTG with the protagonist ($n = 31$). This mirrors what was found with SPT and trauma disclosure. Confidants were either apprehensive to talk about such sensitive information to the protagonist or the trauma hadn't occurred during the beginning stages. Interestingly, within the Affective stage, the communication of PTG was more present, but was not significantly different. Within the in-game context, this could have occurred for two reasons. First, it is only around stage 3 or 4 that confidants even experienced the height of what caused them trauma, so obviously PTG could not be present. Secondly, some confidants were still attempting to figure out how to move past the experiences that haunted them. Confidants were particularly open to talk to the protagonist, but in-game prompts would often mirror this apprehension by showing internal dialogue, such as: "I want to help this person, but...". The internal dialogue gives the player insight that the protagonist might not have the ability to help the confidant move on, thus why PTG was not communicated.

Lastly, in the Stable stage, confidants were significantly more likely to communicate their growth ($n = 37$). Reasoning for disclosure stems from the fact that confidants have complete trust in the protagonist by this time. Moreover, trauma had ended for most confidants by stage 5 and they were able to let their

burden rest. However, most importantly, this was the opportunity for confidants to express how they were going to move on from their difficulties. Up until this point, confidants that expressed growth only explained that they wanted to grow, become stronger, seek new opportunities, make friends, etc. but many did not know the protocol to do so. In stage 5, they had conceptualized the tools necessary to accomplish their growth.

Additionally, types of PTG were not only defined and discussed how they were present, but also where they fell within SPT. Relating to Others was the most significant finding as it was the most present and most dominant throughout stages 2-5. Healthy interpersonal relationships are seen as a strong indicator of positive psychology and PTG. It is common that people would seek to improve their interpersonal relationships to help move past their trauma (Leak, *et al.* 2007). While teammates of the Phantom Thieves discussed a profound desire to help each other, many confidants expressed their relation to others by means of relating to the protagonist. It is important to note that up until Persona 5, the relationship-building system that existed in P3 and P4 were called "social links". It seems appropriate that "confidant" is used to describe NPCs in the game because the majority of relating to others exists almost exclusively with the personal relationships formed with the protagonist. The confidants not only place their trust in the main character, but do so in a way that communicates that he is their main, and sometimes only, ally.

New Possibilities was only dominant in the Exploratory Affective stages, but yielding low results. This theme is present as some confidants express their

interest in trying something new. Trying new things might include specializing in new activities. One confidant, Ann², expresses different goals to overcome her trauma (*i.e.*, being an action movie star) that differ from her hobby being a model. A shut-in, Futaba³ looks to pursue school in-person at the end of her confidant social link. Other confidants find new possibilities by exploring the same activities but by differing methods. Kasumi does this by performing gymnastics as herself and not by imitating her late sister's approach to the sport. While Yoshida⁴, who stays true to his political principles, looks beyond his initial goals to focus on his ideals in differing ways. This is consistent with positive psychology as people try to find meaning and self-actualization (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Interestingly, New Possibilities might be only present in the first stage because the communicated aspirations during this early stage were quite vague. Confidants wanted to explore new paths, but their confidant line was exclusive to finding what that path could be.

While Personal Strength was the third most frequent, and not dominant in any stage, there were in-game themes within confidant dialogue that they wanted to become stronger. This occurred primarily within the teammates of the Phantom Thieves as they wanted to move past the initial trauma and continue not only becoming stronger, but also showing strength. For example, Ryuji⁵ communicates with the protagonist consistently that he wants to continue growing physically and mentally stronger, as that is his method of removing physical and verbal abuse from his mind. Ann also focuses on her physical strength in specific interactions, but she also expresses emotional strength as part of her healing process. Moreover, part of her confidant line is her showing her strength to Shiho⁶ and helping her friend find her own strength.

Appreciation of Life and Spiritual Change were rare in the findings. Many of these instances came episodically and were not communicated in any scenes prior. Moreover, only one instance of this PTG theme was present outside of Stage 5. For example, Sojiro⁷ communicates his thankfulness for his and Futaba's

lives at the end of his confidant line. The woman he loved passed away in the game's narrative, and only at the end of his line can he go to her burial site to visit her. He is no longer embarrassed about his trauma of losing her and feels a new foundation in life - able to move on with his adopted daughter. Second, Spiritual Change is also quite rare as it exists almost exclusively in a confidant social link line regarding a fortune teller, Chihaya⁸. Through her business of fortune telling, she comes to the realization that while she still has a gift, the methods of advice and how the events in her client's lives unfold had to change. Spiritual Change might not be as present as JRPGs either ignore religion or cast it in a negative light.

LIMITATIONS

While this manuscript addresses PTG, and presence and absence of trauma throughout the confidant's line, there are some in-game limitations that should be addressed. First, there are some instances of character versus player knowledge about how a confidant is feeling. Due to interactions outside of the protagonist's knowledge, there are examples of expressed trauma that only the player knows about. Second, some confidants experience trauma but are not open to express what they are going through. Maruki⁹ does not express his frustration with his work being defunded or his girlfriend's critical medical issues. He is experiencing trauma, but it is never mentioned within the confidant line conversations. Lastly, while some confidants have thematic trauma, coders were trained to look into dominant frames. Some confidants experience episodic trauma and were coded accordingly.

However, the confidant personal conversations work as a consistent deepening of the relationship between the protagonist and the confidant. Coding for these social links allows us to observe significant mentions of the trauma and growth the confidants express that players cannot see otherwise. Lastly, the coding for the confidant lines is preferable for internal and external validity for other games that parallel video game relationship building.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Future studies could look into continuing methods for how relationships are formed within gaming narratives. In-game research can further analyse how

² One of the first members of the Phantom Thieves. She is also a close friend and fellow student in the same grade as the protagonist at Shujin High School

³ Adopted daughter of the game's father figure, Sojiro. She calls upon the Phantom Thieves to help with her depression and the later becomes a member

⁴ A politician that has fallen from grace based on false accusations

⁵ First member of the Phantom Thieves, Shujin student, and framed as the best friend of the protagonist

⁶ A Shujin student that survived a suicide attempt and is hospitalized trying to recover from her injuries

⁷ Caretaker and father figure of the protagonist.

⁸ A local fortune teller that runs a small stand in Shinjuku

⁹ The interim Shujin Psychologist

video games express relationship building with the protagonist and with others. For example, *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* not only looks at the deepening bonds with the player, but also how NPCs deepen their bond with other NPCs. Additionally, other video games narratives explore the nature of trauma that can help deepen understanding for how people communicate their hardships and how characters move forward. *Spec Ops: The Line* communicates PTSD, *Majora's Mask* explores the Stages of Grief (Garski, Shepard, & Daniel, 2018). These portrayals of trauma could be beneficial not only for accurate game design, but also how players might use video game trauma portrayal as a coping mechanism. Lastly, an increasing social media phenomenon concerns parasocial relationships with video game characters. Online communities often discuss their favorite characters and romantic relationships, and form communities around them. These communities might help researchers understand personal attachment styles and reliability with video game characters.

Video games hold immense and important potential to work with many clinical disorders and to help many heal through PTG. A clinician simply needs to be willing to explore the topic with their client and learn more about their virtual and internal worlds. With a client's improvement over multiple sessions, it can illustrate the progress of using video games, archetypes, and the heroic myth to help with trauma difficulties. As outlined through this study, there may be different approaches that may be more suitable for clinical cases to help improve client well-being, and useful tools for engagement within the realm of video games.

By utilizing video games in this manner and deepening knowledge about the styles of play, choices within the game, and overlapping characteristics upon a client's life and environments, they are able to potentially continue forward. This approach is novel as it does not place an emphasis on terminating video gaming in order to work therapeutically; rather, the focus is on delving into the immersive worlds of video games in order to reach the client where they are currently, both emotionally and mentally.

The bonds expressed in video game narratives are ones that demonstrate a lasting commitment of trust and friendship. It is only through the deepening bonds that are expressed in the *Persona 5* games do the players recognize confidants' trauma and growth. After all, as Igor¹⁰ mentions within his confidant line

"Involving yourself with others is an important function of your recovery. You've done well. That said, I am not advising superficial relationships. It must not be of frivolity, but a ring of those who would, by morals or faith, lend you their strength. In other words, they are bonds with those who have been robbed of their places to belong. The expansion of said ring will, in return, help you mature as well." (*Persona 5: The Royal*, 2020).

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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¹⁰ Advisor and guide through the protagonist's journey through the metaverse

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