

Motivations for Media Use and Online Belonging in Adolescents with and without Psychiatric Diagnoses

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BACKGROUND

Online belonging refers to feeling connected, emotionally supported, and part of a community during online interactions.

Online is the default context for teen life

96% of U.S. teens use the internet daily. 74% say social media helps them feel more connected to friends, and 72% of teen gamers play to spend time with others.

Motivation Matters

Online use can be connection-seeking (to interact/socialize) or just-for-fun (entertainment without a social goal), and these motives may shape whether online time fosters belonging.

Clinical Tension

Adolescents with psychiatric disorder diagnoses may face barriers to connection-seeking engagement, potentially limiting feelings of online belonging.

AIMS

1. Motivations

Do adolescents with vs without self-reported psychiatric disorder diagnoses differ in motivations for using social media and gaming?

2. Belonging Online

Do adolescents with psychiatric disorder diagnoses report lower online belonging on social media and gaming?

3. Possible Mechanism

Do motivation differences help explain online belonging differences between adolescents with vs without psychiatric disorder diagnoses?

CONCLUSIONS

Online belonging appears to depend on intentional, socially meaningful engagement. For adolescents with psychiatric disorder diagnoses, online environments may offer opportunities for connection but may not reliably foster belonging on their own. Clinical support may be most useful when it helps youth identify safer, more intentional ways to connect online while also strengthening offline social supports.

METHOD

Data source: U.S. national online survey of adolescents, ages 13-17 (N = 1,598; M_age = 15.1; 49% female, 49% male, 1% nonbinary).

Psychiatric disorder diagnoses (self-report):

Adolescents were asked whether they had ever been diagnosed by a doctor with any of the following:

- Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- Social Anxiety
- Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
- Depression

Teens were coded as 1 = at least one psychiatric disorder diagnosis and 0 = no psychiatric disorder diagnosis.

Overall, 20.6% of participants reported ≥1 diagnosis.

Motivations for use (asked separately for social media and for gaming; 1 = never to 5 = almost always):

- **Connection-seeking ("social motivation"):** "How often do you use social media / play games to connect with other people (e.g., interact, message, play with others)?"
- **Just-for-fun ("entertainment motivation"):** "How often do you use social media / play games just to have fun, without a specific goal (e.g., connecting with others)?"

Online belonging:

For social media and gaming, adolescents rated how strongly they agreed that using these platforms made them feel connected, emotionally supported, and part of a community (1= strongly disagree; 5= strongly agree; $\alpha = .80$ social media; $\alpha = .83$ gaming).

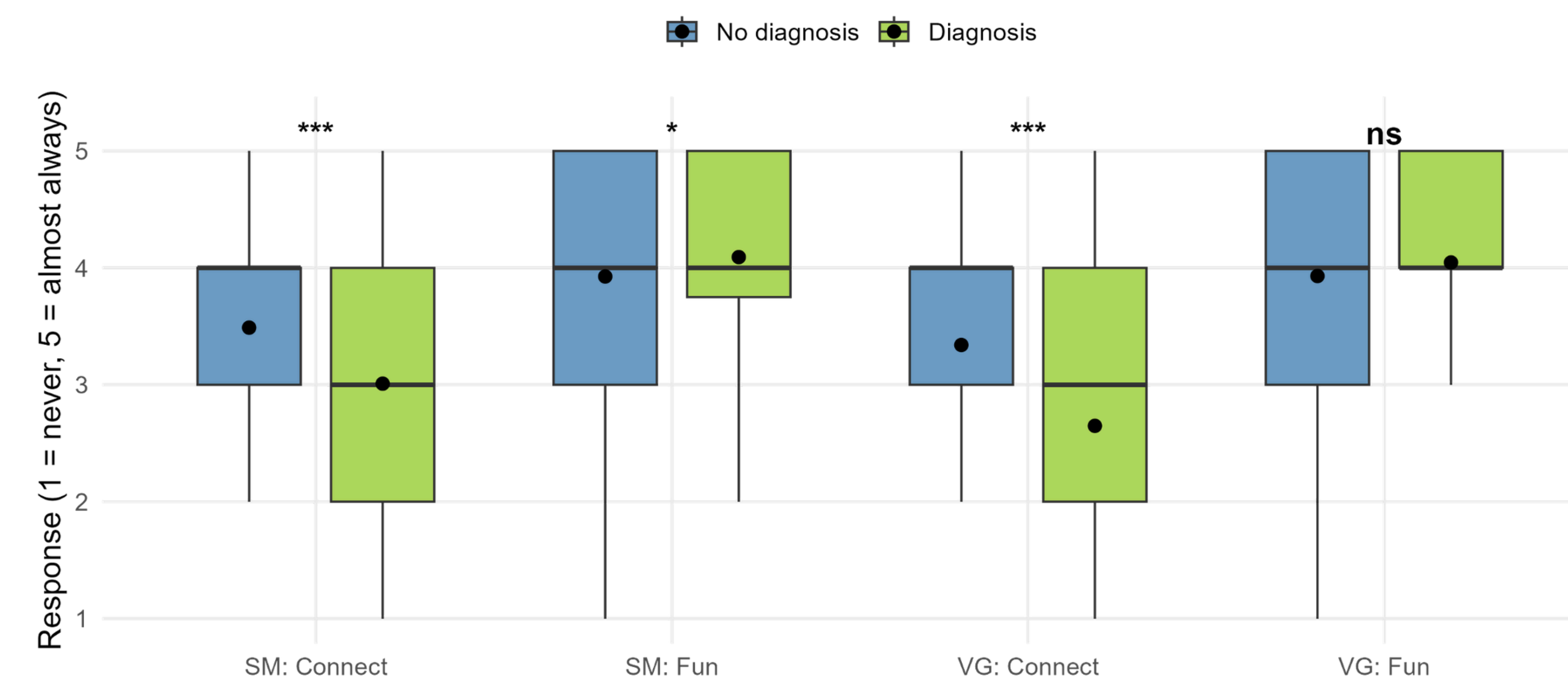
Covariates:

age, gender, relationship status, sexual orientation.

RESULTS

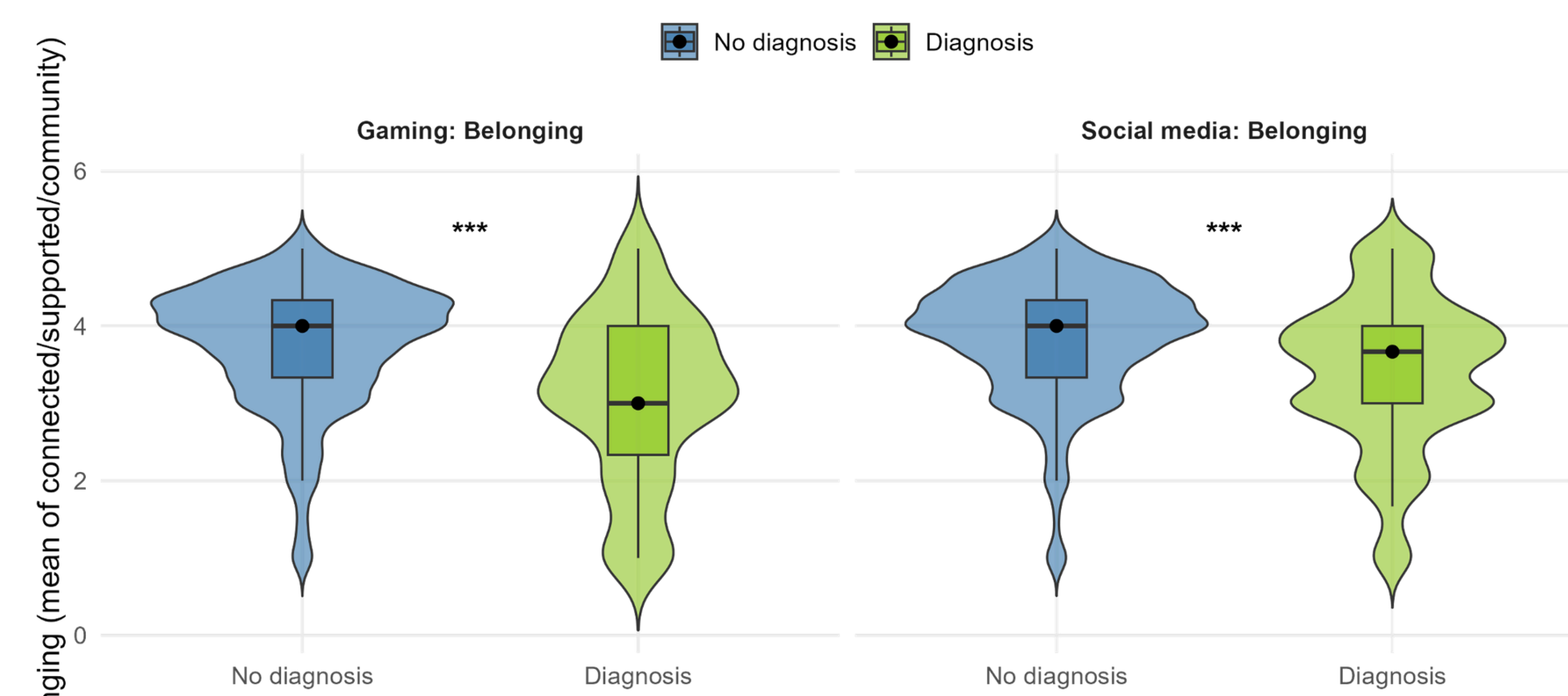
Teens with psychiatric disorder diagnoses reported less connection-seeking motivation on social media and gaming.

RQ1: Motivation differences by diagnosis status



Teens with psychiatric disorder diagnoses reported lower online belonging on both social media and gaming. The belonging gap appears larger in gaming.

RQ2: Online belonging by diagnosis status



Connection-seeking motivation was strongly linked to online belonging, especially in gaming.

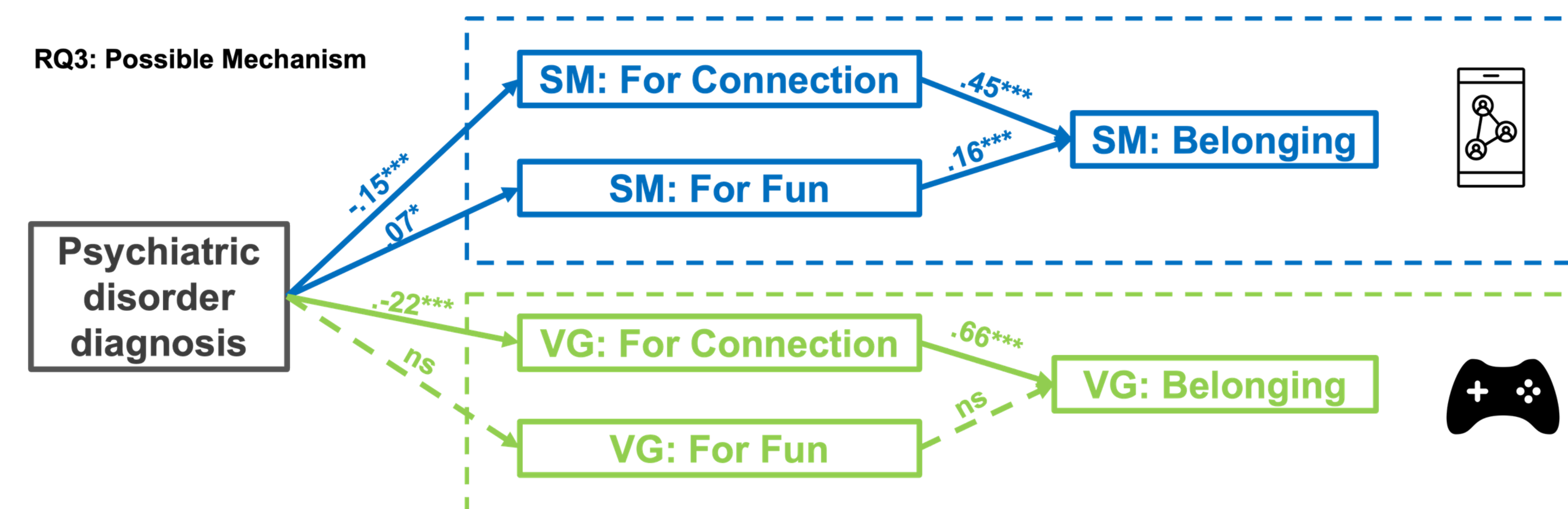


Fig. 1-3, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$