

Understanding Female Gamers' Experiences in Online Video Games Communities

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ABSTRACT

Gaming culture has evolved significantly, transitioning from localized arcades to global digital platforms that connect diverse players. This study explores the lived experiences of female gamers, focusing on the intersection of gender and technology in online gaming spaces. It aims to examine the systemic barriers female gamers face, such as discrimination, gender-based stereotypes, and harassment, while also identifying the coping strategies they employ to navigate these challenges. Objectives of study include exploring discriminatory practices and gender stereotypes female gamers encounter in online video game communities, investigating the effects of gender preconceptions on female gamers' experiences and interactions in online gaming communities, and analysing how female gamers negotiate their identities within online video game communities. Social Identity Theory is used as it is relevant in gaming, where identity is constructed through participation in virtual communities. Eight female gamers were interviewed and the results were analysed thematically. Findings are divided into discriminatory practices and gender stereotypes faced by female gamers, the effects of gender preconceptions on female gamers' experiences and how female gamers negotiate their identities in online gaming communities. Participants described balancing their identities by selectively engaging with different aspects of gaming culture. Despite encountering challenges, female gamers demonstrate resilience, actively challenging stereotypes, and foster supportive networks to counteract the toxicity they face.

Keywords: *Female gamers, harassment, gender bias, coping mechanisms, resilience.*

INTRODUCTION

Online video games have evolved into a significant medium for communication, socialization, and competition, fostering diverse interactions across cultural and geographic boundaries. These platforms bring together players of various ages, genders, and backgrounds, offering shared experiences and opportunities for creativity. However, this inclusivity masks underlying issues of gender inequality, particularly for female gamers. Despite their increasing participation, with women now comprising approximately 45 percent of the gaming community, female gamers face systemic challenges such as harassment, discrimination, and gender stereotyping.

Gaming communities, rooted in a culture of interaction and shared identity, often reflect broader societal biases. While video games were once seen as gender-neutral entertainment, male-dominated subcultures within gaming have perpetuated exclusionary norms. These norms manifest in the marginalization of women, both in terms of community participation and representation within game narratives. Studies highlight the prevalence of negative experiences among female gamers, ranging from subtle biases to overt verbal abuse.

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This persistent inequality underscores the need for a deeper understanding of the unique challenges female gamers encounter in online video game communities.

Recognizing these issues, this study explores the lived experiences of female gamers, focusing on the intersection of gender and technology in online gaming spaces. It aims to examine the systemic barriers female gamers face, such as discrimination, gender-based stereotypes, and harassment, while also identifying the coping strategies they employ to navigate these challenges. The stereotypes often associated with female gamers include sexism and gender discrimination in the gaming community (Yao et al., 2023). Furthermore, the study investigates the role of social identity in shaping female gamers' experiences and how these identities are negotiated within virtual communities.

A significant focus of the study is the concept of "gaming culture," which encompasses the shared values, norms, and interactions that define online gaming communities. While gaming culture provides opportunities for collaboration and connection, as well as self-directed learning (Ismail, 2016), it also perpetuates toxic behaviours and exclusionary practices. For female gamers, these dynamics often result in feelings of isolation and diminished participation. Addressing these issues requires both a critical examination of gaming culture and actionable solutions to promote inclusivity and equity.

Employing Social Identity Theory (SIT) as a theoretical framework, this research delves into the ways group membership and social interactions influence identity formation within gaming communities. SIT highlights how external biases and internalized stereotypes affect female gamers' self-concept and interactions. By applying this framework, the study seeks to uncover the complex interplay between gender, gaming culture, and identity, providing insights into the broader implications of these experiences.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to inform initiatives aimed at creating safer and more inclusive gaming environments. By amplifying the voices of female gamers and shedding light on their experiences, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse on gender equality in technology and digital spaces. The findings aim to guide policymakers, gaming industry stakeholders, and community leaders in fostering diversity, equity, and inclusion within online gaming communities.

The objectives of this research are as follows.

1. To explore discriminatory practices and gender stereotypes female gamers encounter in online video game communities.
2. To investigate the effects of gender preconceptions on female gamers' experiences and interactions in online gaming communities.
3. To analyse how female gamers negotiate their identities within online video game communities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gaming Culture and Gender

Gaming culture has evolved significantly, transitioning from localized arcades to global digital platforms that connect diverse players. Historically perceived as a male-dominated domain, contemporary gaming communities are increasingly diverse, with women comprising nearly half of the gaming population. However, this inclusivity has not eliminated gender-based biases and stereotypes. Burtcher and Spiel (2021) emphasize that subcultures within gaming remain hypermasculine, marginalizing female gamers and reinforcing traditional gender roles. Even game developers have the tendency to develop imbalanced characters where the proportion of male characters are twice of the female characters and the female characters

are given a narrower range of roles than male characters (Rennick et al., 2023). De la Torre-Sierra and Guichot-Reina (2024) in their study found that even though representation of women in video games is changing, there is still a lack of female presence and the continuous reproduction of traditional gender stereotypes in game narratives. Anderson and Bushman (2001) noted that female gamers often face stigma and are excluded from the narrative of "authentic" gamers, highlighting a systemic issue within gaming culture.

In Southeast Asia, the growing popularity of mobile gaming has drawn more female participants, challenging conventional perceptions of gaming. Studies, such as those by Tope (2018), reveal that cultural norms, including expectations of modesty and silence, influence female gamers' interactions in these communities. This underscores the need to examine gaming culture as a space where identity and social norms intersect.

Challenges Faced by Female Gamers

Female gamers encounter multiple challenges, including harassment, stereotyping, and exclusion. Dovey and Kennedy (2006) argue that gaming spaces are implicitly structured to prioritize male participation, leaving women vulnerable to discrimination and hostility. A Pew Research Center (2018) study found that 38% of female gamers experienced harassment, compared to 21% of male gamers.

Common forms of harassment include verbal abuse, unsolicited advances, and exclusion from competitive opportunities. Kuznekoff and Lindsey's (2013) research on voice interactions in Halo 3 highlights that female players receive significantly more negative comments than their male counterparts. Luo (2023) add that in-game character design and narratives often perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes, portraying women as secondary or sexualized figures, further alienating female gamers.

These challenges extend to broader systemic issues, such as underrepresentation in the gaming industry and esports. Kim (2017) notes that these barriers discourage women from pursuing professional gaming careers, perpetuating a cycle of exclusion and bias.

Coping Strategies and Social Support

Female gamers employ various coping mechanisms to navigate the challenges of online gaming. These include muting abusive players, using gender-neutral aliases, and seeking solidarity in women-centric gaming groups. Taylor (2012) describes these strategies as "survival tactics" that allow women to engage with gaming communities while mitigating the risk of harassment. However, such measures can also contribute to feelings of isolation and self-censorship, as female gamers are often compelled to downplay their gender to avoid discrimination. The female gamers have adopted creative strategies in the face of negative stereotypes to protect their self-image as a female who plays video games (Yao et al., 2022). Social support plays a critical role in countering the negative experiences of female gamers. Lourel et al. (2013) emphasize the importance of community-driven initiatives, such as mentoring programs and inclusive gaming forums, in fostering a sense of belonging. In Southeast Asia, organizations like Esports Malaysia (ESM) have launched initiatives to promote gender diversity in gaming, although progress remains limited.

Amestoso et al. (2023) highlight the resilience of female gamers who focus on skill improvement and community-building as strategies to counteract stereotypes and toxicity. Nevertheless, these efforts are insufficient without systemic changes within the gaming industry and culture.

Social Identity Theory

The study employs Social Identity Theory (SIT) as a lens to examine the experiences of female gamers. Tajfel and Turner (2004) argue that an individual's self-concept is shaped by group membership and social interactions. This framework is particularly relevant in gaming, where identity is constructed through participation in virtual communities.

Shliakhovchuk and Garcia (2020) explore how online gaming communities function as spaces for identity negotiation, allowing players to express themselves while navigating group norms. For female gamers, this often involves reconciling their identities as gamers with societal expectations of femininity. Kuss et al. (2022) note that the intersection of gender and gaming culture creates unique challenges, as female gamers must contend with both external biases and internalized stereotypes.

SIT also underscores the impact of exclusionary practices on self-esteem and group dynamics. Ducheneaut (2004) warns that persistent discrimination can erode female gamers' sense of belonging, limiting their participation and contribution to gaming communities. By applying SIT, this study aims to uncover the ways in which gender influences identity formation and social interactions in online gaming.

Addressing Gender Bias and Promoting Inclusivity

Efforts to address gender bias in gaming must tackle both cultural and structural factors. Massanari (2015) argues for the implementation of robust policies against harassment, including clearer reporting mechanisms and stricter consequences for abusive behaviour. Additionally, there is a need for greater representation of women in game development, character design, and esports to challenge existing stereotypes.

Highlighting positive role models and success stories within the gaming community can also inspire change. Crowley (2020) found that female gamers who adopt diverse gender traits—blending traditionally masculine and feminine characteristics—experience greater satisfaction and agency in their interactions. These findings suggest that fostering an inclusive gaming culture requires celebrating diversity and challenging traditional norms.

Initiatives like women-only gaming leagues and community-building events offer valuable platforms for female gamers to connect, share experiences, and advocate for change. However, such efforts must be complemented by broader industry reforms to ensure lasting impact. Naidoo et al. (2020) stress the importance of fostering positive relationships between male and female gamers, as collaboration and mutual respect are essential for breaking down stereotypes and building inclusive communities.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the experiences of female gamers in online video game communities. The approach allowed for an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences, emphasizing subjective interpretations and detailed narratives. Social Identity Theory (SIT) provided the theoretical framework, enabling an examination of how female gamers construct and negotiate their identities within the gaming environment, often shaped by societal norms and group interactions.

The research adopted a qualitative methodology to capture the perspectives of female gamers, focusing on their experiences of discrimination, harassment, and coping mechanisms. This approach facilitated a deeper analysis of how gender biases manifest in online gaming communities and how female gamers respond to these challenges.

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants who met specific criteria: female gamers aged 18 and above, with at least one year of gaming experience, and who had encountered both positive and negative experiences in online gaming. Eight participants were selected, representing diverse gaming genres and platforms (Table 1). Recruitment was conducted through social media platforms like WhatsApp, X (formerly Twitter), and Discord, ensuring access to active members of the gaming community.

Table 1: Participants' age and years they have been playing

| Participant | Age | Years playing |
|---------------|-----|-----------------------|
| Participant 1 | 20 | Since high school |
| Participant 2 | 21 | Since 2018 |
| Participant 3 | 23 | Since two years ago |
| Participant 4 | 23 | Since ten years ago |
| Participant 5 | 23 | Since high school |
| Participant 6 | 23 | Since seven years ago |
| Participant 7 | 23 | Since 2024 |
| Participant 8 | 20 | Since 2022 |

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method, providing flexibility for participants to share detailed accounts of their experiences. Open-ended questions were designed to explore topics such as gender discrimination, stereotypes, and coping strategies. Examples of questions included:

Can you describe any instances of gender bias or stereotypes you've encountered while gaming?

What coping strategies do you use to handle unfavourable interactions in gaming communities?

What steps could make gaming environments more inclusive for female gamers?

Interviews were conducted online and face-to-face, with sessions lasting 20 minutes to an hour. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, ensuring accuracy and preserving the richness of the narratives.

Thematic analysis, as outlined by Clarke and Braun (2006), was used to identify patterns and themes within the data. The process involved familiarization with the transcripts, coding relevant data segments, and categorizing these codes into broader themes. Themes such as "Toxicity," "Gender Bias," "Sexism," "Coping Mechanisms," and "Support Systems" emerged, reflecting the multifaceted experiences of female gamers. The analysis provided insights into the systemic barriers faced by female gamers and their strategies for resilience.

Ethical protocols were strictly followed to ensure participants' privacy and comfort. Participants provided informed consent before the interviews and were assured of confidentiality. They were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. Data was anonymized, and no identifying information was disclosed in the final report.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Exploring Discriminatory Practices and Gender Stereotypes Faced by Female Gamers

a. Toxicity and Harassment

Toxicity, a major theme, includes verbal abuse, mockery, and targeted harassment directed at female gamers. Participants recounted instances of being berated for underperformance, often accompanied by gendered insults such as being told to "stick to the kitchen." Verbal abuse frequently escalated into explicit harassment, including derogatory remarks and inappropriate jokes, particularly in competitive gaming spaces.

P1: I don't play comp though there are some guys...scold me when I didn't manage to clutch the round and started saying I should stop playing a game because I'm a girl.

This toxic environment undermines female gamers' confidence and enjoyment. Male players often assume women are less skilled, and mistakes by female gamers are disproportionately criticized. For example, participants noted that their gaming errors would prompt accusations of incompetence specifically tied to their gender. These behaviours reflect entrenched societal biases that have permeated gaming culture, perpetuating a hostile atmosphere for women. Madden et al. (2021) highlighted how the lack of visibility for female gamers in esports becomes an additional barrier to female participation, which also comes with an increased risk of exposure to harassment, stereotyping, and toxic behaviour.

b. Gender Bias and Stereotypes

Gender bias in gaming manifests as stereotypical expectations and assumptions about women's roles and abilities. Female gamers are often relegated to specific roles, such as support or healer characters, reinforcing caregiving stereotypes. When women choose competitive or action-oriented roles, they are often met with resistance or outright hostility.

P2: It's usually about females playing games like FPS... they started to bash me for not being able to play properly.

Participants shared that excelling in these roles led to accusations of cheating or disbelief in their abilities, further highlighting the double standards they face. Conversely, mistakes or underperformance reinforced biases that women are inherently unsuited for gaming. These stereotypes create an exclusionary dynamic where women must constantly prove their competence, even as their male counterparts face less scrutiny.

P1: If in Valorant, some will say, you girls should just sit in the kitchen instead of playing this game.

P5: They are surprised if I play well...it feels like I have to prove myself because of my gender.

The issue extends beyond gameplay roles to the broader perception of female gamers within the community. Participants noted being labelled as "fake gamers" or accused of playing only to seek attention from male players. Such labels undermine their legitimacy and perpetuate the notion that gaming is a male-dominated space.

Loh et al. (2023) did a study on cyberbullying faced by female influencers where their findings reveal that male internet commenters' presumptions about female influencers are shaped by religion and modesty perceptions. In the case of female gamers, the comments are also shaped by preconceived ideas and stereotypes of females.

c. Sexism and Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment was a common experience reported by participants. Female gamers often faced explicit comments, inappropriate jokes, and unsolicited advances, particularly when using voice chats or identifying as women in multiplayer games. Examples included male players making lewd noises or directing sexualized remarks toward female avatars.

P7: In Roblox, I played horror games alone, and my character is dressed as a female...they use voice chats to sexually harass me.

This hostile environment significantly impacts female gamers' sense of safety and inclusion. Participants described feeling unwelcome and marginalized, with some choosing to limit their participation in certain games or avoid online interactions altogether to avoid harassment.

d. Exclusionary Practices

Exclusion was another recurring theme, particularly in genres perceived as male-dominated, such as first-person shooters and action games. Participants highlighted that male players often viewed female teammates as liabilities, further alienating them from meaningful participation. Competitive environments were especially challenging, as they amplified gender-based scrutiny and exclusionary attitudes.

P1: I'd say it's Valorant. It's an action game...guys will always think it is for them, not for girls.

P4: Competitive games like shooting games, especially Call of Duty and Valorant.

Such practices not only marginalize female gamers but also deter them from fully engaging in gaming culture. The lack of representation and inclusivity perpetuates a cycle where women are underrepresented in both gaming communities and industry roles, reinforcing existing biases.

e. Systemic Implications

The findings align with prior research, including studies by Kuznekoff and Lindsey (2013), which revealed that female gamers face disproportionately negative interactions in online gaming environments. These challenges are not isolated incidents but part of a systemic issue that reflects broader societal biases.

P1: They should not normalize gender stereotypes in video games... all video games are made for everyone.

The perpetuation of gender stereotypes and discriminatory practices in gaming communities underscores the need for cultural and structural changes. Without interventions, these toxic dynamics will continue to hinder female gamers' participation and contribution.

f. Coping Mechanisms and Resilience

Despite these challenges, female gamers demonstrate resilience through various coping mechanisms. Participants described strategies such as muting toxic players, avoiding voice chats, and using gender-neutral usernames to mitigate harassment. While these measures provide temporary relief, they also highlight the significant barriers female gamers face in expressing themselves authentically. Wong and Ratan (2023) found that for female gamers, harassment is associated with distress and anxiety and finding coping strategies may moderate the effects of harassment on female gamers' mental health.

Some female gamers resort to finding a supportive online community and this is concurrent with a study by Loh et al. (2024) where online gaming can provide opportunities for social connection and communication. In addition, some female gamers found strength in challenging stereotypes by excelling in competitive roles and genres. This act of defiance not only enhanced their sense of agency but also contributed to shifting perceptions within their gaming circles. However, this often came at the cost of additional scrutiny and emotional labour.

P1: I usually just mute them, both in chat and voice.

P2: Every game has its own community. I usually ask for guidance or help on Discord.

P5: I have a group of all-women gaming group online...and we rant about what happens in the games.

P8: Mute the mic or ask my friends to play with me...so I don't get assigned with random men.

Examining The Effects of Gender Preconceptions on Female Gamers' Experiences

a. Influence of Gender Preconceptions on Gameplay

Gender preconceptions create significant challenges for female gamers, often dictating their roles and perceived abilities in gaming. Participants reported being labelled as less skilled or incapable simply because of their gender. These biases are particularly pronounced in competitive genres like first-person shooters and action games, which are stereotypically considered male-dominated.

P1: I'd say it's Valorant. It's an action game...guys will always think it is for them, not for girls.

P4: Guys need to chill... there's no use in being biased with the opposite gender when playing games.

Female gamers often face double standards: while male players' mistakes are normalized, women's errors are heavily scrutinized and attributed to their gender. Conversely, participants noted that excelling in these games frequently led to accusations of cheating or disbelief in their abilities, further reinforcing a narrative that women do not belong in competitive gaming spaces. A study by Yao et al. (2022) found that female gamers are treated more favourably by men when she was presented with stereotypical gamer traits, which overlap extensively with stereotypical male gamer traits.

Additionally, participants highlighted how these preconceptions influenced team dynamics. Female gamers were often relegated to support or healer roles, aligning with caregiving stereotypes. While some players enjoyed these roles, the expectation to adopt them limited their ability to explore other aspects of gameplay and reinforced traditional gender norms within gaming culture.

b. Perpetuation of Stereotypes Through Social Interactions

Participants shared that gender stereotypes were frequently reinforced through interactions with other players. Comments like "you're playing for male attention" or "women don't belong in gaming" were commonly directed at female gamers, often accompanied by dismissive or condescending attitudes.

This behaviour creates an unwelcoming environment that alienates female gamers. Many participants described feeling isolated, as their presence in gaming spaces was often questioned or invalidated. These stereotypes also contributed to a lack of trust, with male players often assuming female gamers were less committed or knowledgeable. Furthermore, harassment stemming from these preconceptions often took the form of targeted verbal abuse or inappropriate jokes. Participants noted that their success in games was sometimes met with hostility, as it challenged deeply ingrained notions about gender and skill.

c. Impact on Identity and Participation

Gender preconceptions have a profound effect on female gamers' self-perception and identity. Many participants described internalizing stereotypes, leading to self-doubt and hesitation to participate in certain gaming genres or communities. For example, some avoided competitive gaming due to fear of judgment or ridicule.

However, others responded to these challenges by actively defying stereotypes. Excelling in male-dominated genres became a way to assert their legitimacy and challenge societal expectations. While this approach often boosted confidence and agency, it also required additional effort to prove themselves, placing an emotional burden on female gamers. This is also proven in a study by Kelly, Easpaig and Castillo (2023) where perceptions about women's 'inferior' competence are present, forming a barrier to women's full digital citizenship and have implications on women's gaming performance.

P2: The gaming industry by now should've normalized having females in their industry.

P5: Pro players can create awareness in gaming communities.

The pressure to conform to community norms further complicates identity formation. Participants shared that they often felt the need to downplay their gender to avoid bias, such as by using gender-neutral usernames or avoiding voice chats. While these strategies helped mitigate harassment, they also limited opportunities for authentic self-expression.

d. Social Identity and Group Dynamics

The study's findings align with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004), which emphasizes the role of group membership in shaping individual identity. Female gamers navigate dual identities: one aligned with mainstream gaming culture and another rooted in their gendered experiences. This duality requires constant negotiation, as players balance the desire for acceptance with the need to maintain solidarity with other female gamers.

Participants noted that supportive gaming communities, such as women-focused groups, provided a critical counterbalance to the challenges they faced. These spaces offered opportunities for shared experiences, advice, and camaraderie, fostering a sense of belonging and resilience.

e. Exclusionary Practices and Broader Implications

Gender preconceptions contribute to exclusionary practices that marginalize female gamers. Participants shared that male players often viewed them as liabilities, leading to exclusion from team-based or competitive activities. This dynamic perpetuates a lack of representation in gaming communities and industry roles, reinforcing existing biases.

Moreover, the persistence of these stereotypes discourages many women from pursuing gaming as a professional or recreational activity. The systemic nature of this issue highlights the need for cultural shifts within gaming communities to challenge harmful norms and promote inclusivity.

Exploring How Female Gamers Negotiate Their Identities in Online Gaming Communities

a. Navigating Biases Through Adaptation

Female gamers often adopt adaptive strategies to mitigate the impact of biases and harassment. Many participants described concealing their gender by using gender-neutral usernames, avoiding voice chats, or refraining from sharing personal details in gaming spaces. These strategies were primarily used to avoid targeted harassment or exclusionary behaviours rooted in gender stereotypes.

While these measures provided temporary relief, they also limited female gamers' ability to express their identities authentically. For some participants, these adaptive behaviours led to a sense of invisibility, making it difficult to fully engage with or build meaningful relationships within gaming communities.

b. Resistance and Assertion of Identity

Some female gamers took a more proactive approach, asserting their presence in male-dominated gaming spaces to challenge stereotypes and redefine norms. By excelling in competitive genres and adopting leadership roles, these participants actively countered negative preconceptions about women's abilities.

This approach often provided a sense of empowerment and personal validation. However, it also came with challenges, as participants faced heightened scrutiny and pressure to outperform their male counterparts to gain acceptance. This dual burden of proving themselves while combating bias highlighted the emotional labour required to maintain an

active and visible identity in gaming spaces. Some female gamers, as stated by Kuss et al. (2022), self-identified as gamers without referring to their gender.

c. Role of Gaming Culture in Identity Formation

Gaming culture plays a pivotal role in shaping how female gamers perceive and express their identities. Participants noted that hypermasculine norms within many gaming communities reinforced traditional gender roles, making it difficult for women to integrate fully. For instance, female gamers were often expected to adopt supportive roles within games, aligning with caregiving stereotypes, or were excluded from competitive spaces altogether. These cultural dynamics required female gamers to constantly negotiate their roles and adapt their behaviour to gain acceptance. Some participants reported modifying their playstyle or avoiding certain games to align with community expectations, while others resisted these norms to assert their individuality.

d. Community and Solidarity

Supportive communities, particularly women-centric gaming groups, emerged as crucial spaces for female gamers to navigate their identities. These groups provided a safe and inclusive environment where participants could share experiences, seek advice, and build connections without fear of judgment or harassment.

Participants highlighted the importance of these communities in fostering resilience and confidence. By engaging with like-minded individuals, female gamers were able to counter the isolation and exclusion they often experienced in broader gaming spaces. These communities also empowered participants to challenge stereotypes and advocate for inclusivity within gaming culture.

P3: Build robust reporting systems with clear consequences for abusive behaviour.

P6: Definitely, it would be great if games had ways to report harassment that are actually effective.

e. Social Identity Theory and Dual Identities

The findings align with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004), which emphasizes the influence of group membership on identity formation. Female gamers often developed dual identities: one aligned with mainstream gaming culture and another grounded in their gendered experiences. This duality required constant negotiation, as participants sought to integrate into gaming spaces while maintaining solidarity with other women in gaming.

Participants described balancing these identities by selectively engaging with different aspects of gaming culture. For example, while some chose to participate in mainstream gaming forums such as Discord, others prioritized women-centric spaces to foster a sense of belonging and authenticity. This interplay between external pressures and personal agency highlights the complexity of identity negotiation in gaming.

f. Resilience Through Identity Negotiation

Despite the challenges, female gamers demonstrated significant resilience in navigating their identities. Many participants leveraged their experiences to develop problem-solving skills,

emotional fortitude, and a sense of agency. For these gamers, identity negotiation became a means of asserting their presence and challenging the status quo, ultimately contributing to a broader push for inclusivity and representation in gaming culture.

P1: Don't quit, just keep doing whatever you like.

P2: Don't let them burn your desire to be a gamer. It's our choice to play the games, not theirs.

Participants also emphasized the importance of advocating for systemic changes within gaming communities to reduce the barriers faced by female gamers. This included promoting diverse representation, enforcing anti-harassment policies, and creating inclusive spaces that celebrate diverse identities.

DISCUSSION

Online gaming has become a prominent cultural and social phenomenon, connecting players worldwide and fostering vibrant, interactive communities. However, these spaces often reflect broader societal inequalities, with female gamers facing significant challenges related to gender discrimination, harassment, and exclusion. This study provides an in-depth analysis of these experiences, focusing on discriminatory practices, the impact of gender preconceptions, and the processes of identity negotiation among female gamers. This discussion critically examines the findings, situating them within broader cultural and theoretical frameworks while highlighting the implications for the gaming industry and community dynamics.

Systemic Discrimination and Gender Stereotypes in Gaming

The persistence of gender discrimination in online gaming communities highlights systemic issues rooted in societal biases. Female gamers frequently encounter harassment, exclusion, and gendered assumptions that undermine their participation. Participants in this study reported being subjected to toxic behaviours, including verbal abuse, derogatory remarks, and overt sexual harassment. These experiences align with findings by Kuznekoff and Lindsey (2013) and Massanari (2017), which highlight the pervasive nature of gendered toxicity in digital spaces.

A significant aspect of this discrimination involves the relegation of female gamers to specific roles and stereotypes. Participants noted being pressured to adopt supportive or caregiving roles, such as healers, which align with traditional feminine traits. These expectations restrict their freedom to explore other aspects of gaming and perpetuate the notion that women are less suited for competitive or action-oriented gameplay. This dynamic mirrors societal patterns where women are often assigned roles that emphasize caregiving and support rather than leadership or competition.

Furthermore, female gamers are frequently labelled as "fake gamers" or accused of playing for male attention. These stereotypes delegitimize their presence and contributions, reinforcing a culture where women must constantly prove their authenticity and competence. Such biases not only affect individual experiences but also shape the broader dynamics of gaming communities, perpetuating exclusion and marginalization.

Toxicity and Its Impact on Participation

Toxicity remains a significant barrier to female participation in online gaming. The study revealed that many female gamers adopt defensive strategies, such as muting voice chats or using gender-neutral usernames, to avoid targeted harassment. While these measures mitigate immediate risks, they also highlight the systemic nature of the problem, as female gamers must alter their behaviour to navigate hostile environments.

The emotional toll of toxicity is profound. Participants described feeling unwelcome and unsafe in gaming spaces, with some avoiding competitive genres altogether to reduce their exposure to harassment. This self-censorship not only limits individual engagement but also reduces the visibility of female gamers in these spaces, perpetuating the perception of gaming as a male-dominated activity.

Sexual harassment emerged as a particularly damaging aspect of toxicity. Participants recounted experiences ranging from inappropriate comments to explicit propositions, particularly in multiplayer settings. These behaviours not only violate personal boundaries but also contribute to a culture of fear and exclusion. Recent studies by Luo (2023) confirm that sexual harassment remains a widespread issue in gaming, underscoring the need for stronger interventions to protect vulnerable players.

Sahharon et al. (2024) in their study on anxiety/uncertainty management levels among Malaysian youths which is similar to the experiences of female gamers facing sexual harassment, indicates that a moderate approach to communication, with social networking sites playing a crucial role in reducing uncertainty, fostering positive relationships, and strengthening social ties across various contexts; while locality, community structure, social support, and cultural norms significantly influence these dynamics.

Gender Preconceptions and Their Influence on Identity

Gender preconceptions significantly shape the experiences of female gamers, influencing how they interact with others and perceive themselves. Participants in this study reported being subjected to assumptions about their skills, legitimacy, and motivations. These biases create a double standard, where women must consistently outperform their male counterparts to gain recognition, while any mistakes are disproportionately criticized.

The expectation that female gamers conform to traditional gender roles extends beyond gameplay to community dynamics. Participants noted being excluded from decision-making processes or competitive opportunities, as male players often dismissed their contributions. Female gamers' abilities as competent players are normally questioned or doubted and they are not regarded as true or hard-core gamers (López-Fernández et al., 2021). This exclusion reinforces a culture where women are perceived as outsiders, limiting their ability to fully engage with gaming communities.

Moreover, these preconceptions have a profound impact on self-perception and identity. Participants described internalizing stereotypes, leading to self-doubt and hesitation to participate in certain genres or activities. This internalized bias highlights the cyclical nature of gender inequality in gaming, as negative experiences discourage female gamers from asserting themselves, further perpetuating their underrepresentation.

Identity Negotiation and Adaptive Strategies

The study revealed that identity negotiation is a central aspect of female gamers' experiences. Participants often adopted strategies to navigate hostile environments, balancing their desire

for acceptance with the need to protect themselves from harassment. These strategies included concealing their gender through anonymity, avoiding voice communication, and selectively engaging with certain aspects of gaming culture.

This results to female gamers choosing male roles to hide their identity and avoid any unwanted remarks (Garcia-Portela & Lopez-Figueroa, 2024) and their study also highlighted how female gamers are not given enough credit for everything they must endure, given that they must overcome more significant obstacles.

While these measures provided a degree of safety, they also constrained participants' ability to express themselves authentically. For many female gamers, the act of hiding their gender was both a coping mechanism and a source of frustration, as it limited their ability to form meaningful connections within gaming communities. Most female gamers also started late in gaming compared to male gamers because of cultural and social stereotypes as video games are often more closely associated with male interests (Gisbert-Pérez et al., 2024).

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004) offers a useful lens for understanding these dynamics. Female gamers often develop dual identities: one aligned with mainstream gaming culture and another grounded in their gendered experiences. This duality requires constant negotiation, as participants navigate the tension between integration and self-expression.

Supportive communities emerged as a critical resource for identity negotiation. Participants emphasized the importance of women-centric gaming groups, which provided safe spaces to share experiences, seek advice, and build solidarity. These groups not only fostered resilience but also empowered participants to challenge stereotypes and advocate for inclusivity within broader gaming culture.

Industry and Community Responsibility

The findings of this study underscore the need for systemic reform to address gender bias and inequality in gaming. While individual resilience and community support are valuable, they are insufficient to overcome the structural barriers that perpetuate discrimination. The gaming industry, as a key stakeholder, must take proactive steps to foster inclusive environments.

One essential measure is the stricter enforcement of anti-harassment policies. Platforms must implement robust reporting mechanisms and ensure that perpetrators face meaningful consequences for toxic behaviour. Recent initiatives by companies like Riot Games and Twitch demonstrate that industry-led efforts can contribute to safer gaming spaces. However, these measures must be consistently applied to achieve lasting impact.

Representation is another critical factor. The lack of diverse voices in game development, character narratives, and industry leadership perpetuates stereotypes and limits opportunities for inclusion. Promoting gender diversity within the gaming workforce can help challenge these norms and create content that resonates with a broader audience. Participants in this study highlighted the importance of seeing themselves reflected in gaming characters and narratives, as representation fosters a sense of belonging and legitimacy.

Community-driven initiatives also play a vital role in promoting inclusivity. Mentorship programs, women-only gaming leagues, and inclusive events provide opportunities for female gamers to connect, share experiences, and advocate for change. These initiatives not only empower individual players but also contribute to cultural shifts within gaming communities, challenging exclusionary dynamics and fostering collaboration.

Broader Implications and Future Directions

The challenges faced by female gamers are not unique to gaming but reflect broader societal patterns of gender inequality. As gaming continues to grow as a cultural and social force, it has the potential to lead the way in promoting diversity and inclusion. By addressing systemic biases and fostering equitable participation, the gaming industry can serve as a model for other digital and creative sectors.

Future research should explore the experiences of diverse populations, including intersectional identities that account for race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Additionally, longitudinal studies could provide insights into the long-term impact of systemic reforms and community initiatives, offering a deeper understanding of their efficacy in promoting inclusivity.

Through collaborative efforts between developers, community leaders, and players, the gaming industry can create spaces that value diversity, foster connection, and enable all players to participate authentically. The findings of this study highlight the urgent need for such changes, emphasizing that equity in gaming is not only a moral imperative but also a means of enriching the medium for all participants.

CONCLUSION

This study sheds light on the multifaceted challenges faced by female gamers in online video game communities, emphasizing the systemic barriers created by gender discrimination, toxic behaviours, and deeply ingrained stereotypes. While the digital gaming space has become a powerful platform for connection and collaboration, it remains heavily influenced by societal biases that undermine female gamers' experiences and contributions.

The findings reveal that female gamers encounter pervasive harassment, exclusionary practices, and restrictive gender norms that shape their participation and identity within these communities. Many resort to adaptive strategies, such as anonymity and self-censorship, to navigate the hostile environment, but these measures often come at the cost of authentic self-expression and meaningful engagement. Despite these challenges, female gamers demonstrate resilience, by actively challenging stereotypes, and fostering supportive networks to counteract the toxicity they face.

Social Identity Theory offers a valuable framework for understanding the dual identities female gamers negotiate within gaming spaces. On one hand, they seek inclusion and recognition within mainstream gaming culture; on the other, they strive to maintain solidarity and authenticity in their gendered experiences. This negotiation reflects the complex interplay of individual agency and systemic constraints, underscoring the need for structural changes to create equitable gaming environments.

The implications of this study extend beyond individual experiences, highlighting the collective responsibility of the gaming industry and community to address these issues. Developers and platform providers must prioritize anti-harassment measures, implement robust reporting mechanisms, and enforce consequences for abusive behaviour. Representation also plays a critical role; increasing gender diversity in game design, character narratives, and industry leadership can challenge entrenched stereotypes and promote inclusivity.

Furthermore, community-driven initiatives, such as mentorship programs and inclusive gaming events, are vital for empowering female gamers and fostering cultural shifts within gaming spaces. By amplifying the voices of women and other marginalized groups, these efforts can contribute to a more inclusive and welcoming gaming culture.

As gaming continues to evolve as a cultural and social force, addressing the systemic challenges faced by female gamers is not only a matter of equity but also an opportunity to enrich the medium itself. By dismantling gender biases and fostering inclusivity, the gaming community can create spaces where all players feel valued, respected, and free to participate authentically. This study serves as a call to action for stakeholders to collaborate in building a gaming landscape that reflects the diversity and creativity of its global audience.

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