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### **Breaking Gender Stereotypes in the Gender Community: Importance in Providing All-Round Support for Female Gamers Against Misogyny**

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## **Abstract**

The experience of female gamers in online gaming and gaming communities are characterized by a lack of social-emotional and organizational support, as well as prevalent general harassment and sexual harassment. Offline, negative stereotypes associated with female gamers and the lack of understanding from others towards women with video games as a hobby lead to the unwillingness of women to self-identify as gamers. Gender stereotypes, specifically, traits of male gamers being traditionally associated with gamer stereotypes cause the exclusion of female gamers and feminine traits from fair and normal treatment in the gaming community. In this contribution, the effects of existing gender stereotypes and misogynistic ideals present in society on the gamer stereotype and gaming community, as well as the subsequent treatment of female gamers are examined. I conclude that only a multifaceted approach capable of addressing the aforementioned relationship between the larger society and the gaming world would be effective in improving the overall condition and support for women in the gaming community. Additionally, I argue that the categorization and grouping of coping strategies used by female gamers in response to harassment online should be standardized into specific categories – taking into account previous methods of categorization grounded in both quantitative and qualitative approaches – to benefit future research.

*Keywords:* gender stereotypes, gamer stereotypes, gendered harassment, female gamers, gaming

## **Breaking Gender Stereotypes In The Gaming Community: Importance In Providing All-Round Support for Female Gamers Against Misogyny**

Video game is a medium in which players are given access to “a gamut of idealized attributes embodied by ready-made, idealized roles ...in highly immersive narratives,” (Przybylski et al., 2012, p.70), a place for individuals to “connect and foster their mutual interests” (Lynch et al., 2016, p.566). These are some of the many benefits and reasons – social and personal – why one may want to engage in video games.

However, the word “gamer” most often gives rise to a profile of a teenage boy or man. Gamer stereotypes are gendered; whereas male stereotypes are compliant with gamer stereotypes, female stereotypes are compliant with traits opposite of gamer stereotypes (Morgenroth et al., 2020). Female gamers expressed the sentiment that gaming is perceived as an unusual interest amongst females, which along with the very negative stereotype of female gamers in an offline setting leave them reluctant to label themselves as a gamer (McLean & Griffiths, 2019).

Despite popular belief, evidence indicates that the gamer stereotype is inaccurate: gamers are not predominantly male (Paaßen et al., 2017). And though there is no evidence of a difference in how both genders are affected by the negative effects – strengthened beliefs towards traditional gender roles and hostile sexism – of video games (Fox & Potocki, 2016; Blackburn & Scharrer, 2019; McCullough et al., 2020), there is a disproportionate degree in how those negative effects affect and manifest themselves in the treatment and experience of female gamers online, versus those of male gamers.

Most, if not all female players share the common experience of harassment being a day-to-day issue they face while playing video games online (Cote, 2017), to the point where

interactions amongst female gamers are often discussions on avoiding negative experiences and harassment rather than moments of bonding and social support (McLean & Griffiths, 2019). As Ekiciler et al. (2022) states, sexism-based toxic keywords such as “bitch, whore, cunt” are used frequently in-game and online to shame women, with hateful molestation achieved through the use of labels such as “cancer, fat bitch, plague,” along with “like a girl” comments to minimize female players’ achievements (p.4).

The purpose of this literature review is to identify and analyze all the factors key to increasing gender equality, specifically for female gamers, in the gaming community. The relationship between existing gender stereotypes and gamer stereotypes will be analyzed to better understand their connection to female gamers’ experiences with harassment in online video games and their resulting coping strategies, as well as the treatment of female gamers both online and offline. Considering the recent rise in video game players in 2020 and 2021 where two-thirds of Americans, or 227 million now play video games (Snider, 2021) this paper seeks to better inform and educate gaming and related industry professionals in improving support for female gamers through a multi-faceted approach, and help aid in the prevention and regulation of gender-based harassment behavior and sentiment in the gaming community.

Finally, I would like to further highlight the importance and necessity of extensive involvement from gaming and related industry professionals in the efforts combating misogyny in gaming. Not just for their control and influence over the contents of games and the broader gaming culture, but for the fact that organizational responsiveness – actions and efforts from the gaming companies addressing female players’ experiences with harassment – from the video game industry has a key impact in whether female video game players decide to keep participating after being harassed (Fox & Tang, 2017).

## Literature Review

Based on the general societal opinion, gamer stereotypes are gendered; stereotypes of men and teenage boys are compatible with stereotypes of gamers involving traits such as “competitive, analytical abilities, logical, persistent, etc. ” while stereotypes of women and teenage girls are compatible with stereotypes of non-gamers involving traits such as “athletic, interested in own appearance, fashionable, well groomed, obedient, etc.” (Morgenroth et al., 2020, p.558). The label of *gamer* is perceived stereotypically as male and not female. As well, most figures in gaming industries, communities, and competitions, regardless of prominence are overwhelmingly male (Paaßen et al., 2017).

This prevalent, gendered stereotype of male gamers translates into negative experiences for female gamers as they navigate the online space, through gaming communities, sharing common experiences such as being excluded from having an active role in-game, as well as not being treated seriously or respected for their contribution to the game by other male players (McLean & Griffiths, 2019). The treatment of female gamers and their perceived abilities match the counter-stereotypes of a stereotypical gamer, where male gamers expect them to be obedient. In their eyes, female gamers fall short of some of the key traits of a stereotypical gamer: analytical abilities and logic. Furthermore, a literature review by Paaßen et al. (2017) evaluating the accuracy of the male gamer stereotype found that as the criteria used to determine whether or not an individual is a gamer loosens, the less accurate the stereotype that only men play video games becomes. In other words, the prevalent idea as well as existing statistics and research that presents gaming in the modern day as a male-dominated hobby or field should be reconsidered, especially as one of the first steps towards breaking the commonly presented male gamer stereotype.

As relevant in the discussion of the effects of gender in the context of gender expression, in video games, the method of portrayal for both female and male characters in video games is demonstrated to affect player perception and attitudes towards women and rigid beliefs in gender roles as a whole. Based on Lynch et al. (2016) study, though video games portray female characters more positively in recent years and include more playable female characters, there is still a lack of games with a primary female lead. Lynch stated that as nonprimary characters are not as central to the story, they are usually sexualized to increase their appeal – such is the common sexualization of female characters in video games. The consequences of these misogynistic portrayals of female characters are grave. Regular video game consumption throughout one's life is associated with interpersonal aggression, hostility against women defying traditional gender roles and expectations, and rape myth acceptance (Fox & Potocki, 2016).

Additionally, the frequency of video games predicts internalized misogyny in women (McCullough et al., 2020). In Blackburn & Scharrer's (2019) study, it was found that the frequency of consumption of video games self-described as violent is associated with beliefs that "masculinity should entail aggression, toughness, dominance, or restrictive emotionality" (p.320). Both female and male participants in the Fox & Potocki (2016) and Blackburn & Scharrer's (2019) studies were not reported to be affected differently by the methods of the portrayal of video game characters. Essentially, both genders appear to be equally affected and influenced by the contents of video games.

The feminist identity as a protective factor against internalized misogyny caused by video game play is explored in McCullough et al. (2020) study. In women, lower scores on the synthesis dimension of feminist identity (Bargad & Hyde, 1991) are correlated significantly with higher levels of internalized misogyny and more time spent on video games, but the opposite for

female players who scored higher. If a replicated study in which a scale equivalent to the synthesis dimension of feminist identity – except measuring for the degree of feminist ideals and attitudes among men – is used to see similar results with male video game players, it may point to feminist ideals being a general protective factor against misogynistic ideals in video games.

While the beliefs in gender roles of both female and male players are affected by video game content and portrayal of characters, the two groups are not affected in the same way in how those beliefs inform their experiences in online video games. For male gamers, the likelihood of general harassment behavior is predicted by social dominance orientation, hostility against women defying traditional gender roles and expectations, and frequency of play (Tang & Fox, 2016). As hostile sexism associated with video game play (Fox & Petocki, 2016) grows, general harassment behavior in male players also increases (Tang & Fox, 2016).

For female gamers, there is the commonly shared experience of having their abilities challenged and having to prove their gaming skills and worthiness to play the game to other gamers “acting as gatekeepers” (McLean & Griffiths, 2019, p.982). Female gamers are almost forced to engage in an expression of masculinity, having to display roughness and dominance to participate (Blackburn & Scharrer, 2019). Considering the various adverse effects negative portrayals of characters in video games can have on the quality of gameplay and the interaction between players – all regardless of gender – it is important for the writing of video game characters to become more dynamic and to aim toward more non-traditional expressions of masculinity and femininity.

The majority of women have experienced instances of male harassment, general and sexual harassment in online gaming spaces, (McLean & Griffiths, 2019) where general harassment, according to Tang & Fox (2016) encompasses behavior such as saying “general

insults; made comments about others' abilities to play; asked others to leave the game, etc.” and sexual harassment encompasses behavior such as making “sexist comments or insults; made comments about appearance or weight; doubted their motivations for playing video games because of their gender; expressed unsolicited liking of affection toward someone; made a rape joke or threatened to rape” (p.517). In addition, experiences with sexual harassment online affect women differently than general harassment – Tang & Fox's (2016) study finds that rumination, which occurs after sexual harassment leads to withdrawal from the game. Furthermore, rumination, along with a lack of organizational responsiveness also leads to women quitting games. As a result, there is a shared and described “feeling of acceptance” (McLean & Griffiths, 2019, p.980) in female gamers towards playing alone and giving up on forming social bonds with others when faced with harassment from men in games, especially due to the lack of overall social support from other players, including male players (McLean & Griffiths, 2019).

Female gamers employ a variety of coping strategies in response to harassment to make their experience in games more manageable. Amongst all the different described strategies, such as seeking help from other players and attempting to communicate (Fox & Tang, 2017) and emphasizing skill differences in the game (Cote, 2017), the two primary coping strategies used by female players as identified across three different kinds of literature are the disguising of their gender and engagement in avoidance behavior (Fox & Tang, 2017; McLean & Griffiths', 2019; Cote, 2017).

In further discussion of the types of coping strategies reported in existing literature, there are some observed differences in the grouping of different behaviors and strategies among Fox & Tang, McLean & Griffiths', and Cote's study. According to Fox & Tang's (2017) study, coping strategies can be clustered into five main groups: gender masking, seeking help, avoidance,

denial, and self-blame. In Cote's study, there are five main types of coping strategies: leaving online gaming, avoiding strangers, camouflaging gender, emphasizing skill, and assuming more aggressive personalities (Cote, 2017, p.143). Comparing the five main coping strategies, certain strategies are listed under one category in one paper, but in a different category when described in another. For instance, one of Cote's main strategies of "leaving online gaming" is a smaller strategy under Fox & Tang's broader "avoidance" strategy category.

Additionally, though Fox & Tang defined the strategy of denial as "tolerating and minimizing the effects of harassment" (p.1299) through the denying of one's own emotions, McLean & Griffiths saw denial as a strategy based on the literal denial of the other gamers' comments, assuming an active, responsive role of making sarcastic responses or insulting the people back. All the while, Cote categorized behavior that would be considered by McLean & Griffiths as denial strategies into a unique category of "personality strategies".

These discrepancies might be because while Fox & Tang's utilized exploratory factor analysis to categorize the different coping strategies, Cote used NVivo along with a grounded theory approach, while McLean & Griffiths utilized thematic analysis. Furthermore, Fox & Tang gathered quantitative data, as compared to Cote and McLean & Griffiths' use of qualitative data. Future research on the coping strategies of female gamers will benefit from the development of a standard for the categorization of coping strategies, allowing more effective comparisons and analysis of data to be done across studies.

Concluding the discussion of misogyny in online gaming spaces, existing gender roles, and beliefs that are discriminatory against women influences and inform the in-game and online behavior of participants. Hostile attitudes and harassing behaviors towards women occur as a result. This argument is supported by the link of collective narcissism and its relationship with

social dominance orientation, where two factors of social dominance orientation, group-based dominance and opposition to equality are found to be positively correlated to collective narcissism (de Zavala et al., 2009). To begin, in both men and women, collective narcissism and political conservatism are positively correlated with tolerance towards violence against women (de Zavala and Bierwiazzonek, 2021). Misogynistic behavior is observed alongside collective narcissism outside of the context of video games, in general society. However, this behavior can be connected to sexist beliefs within online gaming communities. In men, sexual harassment behaviors in online video games can be predicted by social dominance orientation and hostile sexism; while general harassment behaviors in online video games can be predicted by social dominance orientation, hostile sexism, game involvement, and weekly game-play (Tang & Fox, 2016). As collective narcissism and social dominance orientation are directly related, individuals – specifically male players – who have collective narcissism, which is correlated with tolerance towards violence against women (de Zavala and Bierwiazzonek, 2021) are likely also the ones that engage in sexual and general harassment in games, whose behavior, in further support of the argument is predicted by high social dominance orientation and hostile sexism (Tang & Fox, 2016). Individuals that are already misogynistic or have emerging traits of a sexist worldview express their beliefs online, in-game, harassing and excluding female gamers. The state of misogyny in the broader gaming community is therefore contingent on that of society; effective improvements in the treatment of female video game players will not be seen unless the same has been observed in the general society.

### **Conclusion**

Misogyny has been for as long as humans have. To expect the online world – composed of the same members of a society in which sexism still exists – to be free of discrimination

against women is unrealistic. In reality, the progression of the state of women's rights online and offline would most likely happen alongside each other. However, it also means that the strategies effective in affecting change online in gaming communities may have the same impact offline, in the regular world. The purpose of this literature review is to identify, as above, factors affecting the treatment of female players in the gaming world, as well as explore possible strategies and options to combat the misogyny women face in-game.

Major industry companies, leaders, and general players alike must effectively tackle and address the roles and effects that gender roles play in the current state of the video game community while keeping in mind the relationship between gender stereotypes, gamer stereotypes, and harassment toward women in online gaming. This requires a multifaceted approach that simultaneously provides both social and emotional support for female players, and additionally, broader yet realistic changes to the culture of video games. Importantly, organizational responsiveness from video game companies is key to whether or not female gamers decide to continue playing (Fox & Tang 2017).

To begin, debunking the male gamer stereotype and the gamer stereotype, especially of the existing stereotypes and traits that are traditionally attributed towards gamers is necessary and key for more equal representation of female gamers and feminine traits in the gaming space. Second, creating portrayals and writings of video game characters that are more dynamic, with an aim towards more non-traditional expressions of masculinity and femininity also has the same effect as above. Equally important is increasing promotion and support for video games that have these characteristics.

Then, there are different ways of increasing social support for female gamers, which can be done through the following three methods, all directly related to the organizational

responsiveness of video game companies: First, the prevention and regulating of negative, harassment behavior in-game, but also the public denouncing and addressing of that behavior from major industry names and companies. Second, general education and encouragement for players to speak up against negative, harassing behavior in-game. Lastly, through the fostering, endorsement, and promotion of positive and supportive environments, such as online groups or communities from major industry names and companies.

To conclude the strategies that can be used to improve female participation and comfort level in the gaming community, there should be efforts to increase representation and spotlighting of female gamers on all platforms, such as in streaming, esports, and gaming communities and forums, by major industry names and companies. All of the proposed strategies above aim to break the existing gendered, male gamer stereotype to include female stereotypes and feminine traits; increasing participation, exposure, and representation of female gamers, both in public and in private, and creating a gaming community that is supportive and protective of any players' rights to enjoy the game. (Fox & Tang, 2017; Morgenroth et al., 2020; Paaßen et al., 2017)

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