



“They don’t mean to hurt”: Female gamers’ reluctance in recognizing and confronting sexism in gaming as an online- offline juxtaposition

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Abstract

Female gamers have long suffered from gender-based online abuse in the gaming community. Apart from commonly observed quitting and gender-masking behaviors from female gamers, this study explores what female gamers understand as sexism, how female gamers react to it, and why they choose certain reactions instead of others. Findings show that female gamers are keenly conscious of normalized sexism in gaming culture, and thus often prioritize preventing personal interaction with strangers online, resulting in their shared preference for gaming with trusted acquaintances, which makes gaming an online-offline juxtaposition. Shouldering gender norms in doubled dimensions of gaming and specific real-life relationships, female gamers thus become reluctant to recognize and confront less violent sexism from male acquaintances. Female gamers’ strategic self-protection, although gaining them relatively safer gaming spaces, also consolidates sexism in gaming, and further suggests gaming as a critical social space for reproducing broader gender inequalities.

Keywords

Coping mechanisms against discrimination, gamer culture, reproduction of gender inequality, sexism, video games, women in gaming

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Introduction

Gaming is one of the fastest growing industries in today's digital economy. In 2021, the global gaming sector reached 214.2 billion USD of market value, with projections for 2024 exceeding 278 billion USD (Read, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic significantly contributed to this growth, transforming gaming from a mere source of entertainment into a vital virtual channel for socializing with friends and strangers. However, with increased user interaction, toxic behaviors such as harassment, trolling, and doxing have become prevalent. Among these toxic behaviors, gender-based abuse has emerged as a major issue. A survey conducted among female gamers in the US, Germany, and China revealed that 77% of 900 female gamers reported being targeted due to their gender. These experiences included not only direct insult and bullying, but also "judgment of skills," "gatekeeping," "patronizing comments," and "unsolicited relationship requests" (Reach3 Insights, 2021). Studies have further warned that gaming platforms and other gaming-themed online communities have become hotbeds for the reproduction and diffusion of online misogyny and other extremist ideologies (Kowert et al., 2022; United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, 2022). This underscores the urgent need to understand the intersection between gaming, masculinity, and gender-based online hate.

Existing literature has identified common coping strategies adopted by female gamers in response to explicit sexual harassment and verbal abuse, such as withdrawing from multi-player online gaming, avoiding interaction with other gamers, and concealing their female identity (Cote, 2017; Fox and Tang, 2017; McLean and Griffiths, 2019). However, while these studies highlight behavioral responses, they lack a comprehensive examination of the decision-making process female gamers undergo when selecting appropriate coping mechanisms for diverse expressions of sexism in gaming. To address this gap, this study explores how female gamers coordinate their responses to sexism in gaming at both cognitive and behavioral levels, investigating female gamers' coping mechanisms through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 40 female gamers. Rather than viewing female and male gamers in a static oppressor-subordinate relationship, this study posits that female gamers engage in a constant and dynamic bargaining of status within the gaming gender hierarchy.

Aware of the sexist community atmosphere, female gamers often retreat to private circles to avoid confrontation with sexist stranger. In addition to quitting and gender-masking behaviors, gaming with trusted male acquaintances in real life can largely prevent encounters with direct and hostile sexism. However, this creates a juxtaposition between online and offline contexts, where female gamers feel compelled to perform gender roles in both gaming and interpersonal relationships with male acquaintances. Female gamers swiftly adjust their reactions to sexism based on the perceived nature of the offense and the social cost of damaging their relationship with the perpetrator, resulting in a reluctance to recognize and confront benevolent sexist behaviors from close male acquaintances. While these strategic self-protection and adaptation measures ensure basic safety, they also contribute to the perpetuation of a sexist gaming culture. This dynamic underscores the significance of gaming as a critical social field for consolidating broader gender inequalities in society.

Literature review

Inherent sexism in gaming culture

Playing video games is often perceived as a masculine activity. Like other pursuits driven by digital technologies, gaming is constructed as an inherent part of the male-dominated digital culture and economy (Kendall, 2002; Selwyn, 2007; Turkle, 1997). Recent studies examining the discourse of masculinity within gaming activities have conceptualized “(toxic) geek masculinity” to understand the entanglement between manhood and the possession of specific cultural capital in the gaming arena and, more broadly, in the digital space (Braithwaite, 2016; Massanari, 2016; Salter and Blodgett, 2012, 2017). In most contexts, the term “geek” depicts a white, young, middle-class, cisgender, and straight male who is strongly interested in or even obsessed with digital technology and related cultural products, such as video games (Braithwaite, 2016; Kendall, 2011; Kowert et al., 2014). Investigating why the geek community strongly opposes female participation, Salter and Blodgett (2017) observe that geeks often portray themselves as an already marginalized group by hegemonic masculinity. Lacking traditional masculine traits such as physical strength, athleticism, and aggressiveness, geek males feel the need to “carve out and build their own institutions and definitions of masculinity to excel” (Salter and Blodgett, 2017: 3-4). This involves the possession of digital cultural capital, which enables geeks’ masculine dominance of the virtual realm.

As a result, men often refuse to acknowledge women as fellow gamers, relying on a seemingly meritocratic rationale that emphasizes women’s alleged incompetence or lack of interest in serious gaming as a boundary maintenance technique (Cote, 2020; Eklund, 2016; Kowert et al., 2017; Paul, 2018). Whether in gaming as a leisure activity or in professional gaming, women are often expected to demonstrate high levels of passion and skill to qualify for the gamer identity (Paul, 2018; Taylor, 2012). However, this “earn it” logic often overlooks that the vast majority of video games are designed to host masculine gender performance, such as aggression, dominance, competition, and a sexualized gaze upon female bodies (Hartmann et al. 2015; Johnson, 2014). Consequently, women have rarely been encouraged to participate from the outset. Furthermore, the antipathy towards women in the male-dominated digital world has intensified in recent years, triggered by the increasingly visible female presence in cyberspaces and efforts by so-called “fake geek girls” to redefine the geek identity, resulting in violent, reactionary counterstrikes (Braithwaite, 2014; Consalvo, 2012; Salter and Blodgett, 2012). High-profile outbreaks of such escalated hatred, like the infamous #Gamergate, have brought gender-based identity policing from an individual to a collective level. These events serve not only as manifestos of the gendered gamer identity but also as public displays of violence intended to intimidate potential female gamers (Braithwaite, 2016; Gray et al., 2017).

Female representation in gaming and gendered gaming experiences

Women have long been underrepresented and misrepresented in gaming, whether in the industry, as characters in video games, or within the gamer population. Decades of

research examining the (re)production of gendered gaming content generally agree on the blatant sexualization and marginalization of female presence in video games featuring human characters. Key findings include: 1) there are significantly fewer female characters than male characters; 2) even fewer female characters play important or meaningful roles in game narratives; 3) female characters' physical appearances are much more likely to be hypersexualized compared to male characters (Downs and Smith, 2010; Lynch et al., 2016). Misrepresentation of women in gaming extends beyond in-game female characters to female gamers in real life. Female gamers are seldom seen as independent, agentic individuals but are rather perceived as “backseat gamers” brought into male-dominated gaming scenes by male gamers (Yodovich and Kim, 2022), which justifies denying them the authentic gamer identity. Those perceived as unsolicited female intruders risk being stigmatized as attention-seeking and looking for undeserved favors from male gamers in exchange for their sexual resources (Ruberg et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2009). This stigmatization justifies the sexual harassment and slut-shaming of female gamers with the logic that “they are asking for it”—a hostile form of sexism in gaming. In addition to being imagined as sexualized affiliates to male gamers, female gamers are frequently assumed to be interested only in casual games or games with conventionally feminine topics, such as fashion and romance. They are expected to perform poorly in more “hardcore” categories, such as action, adventure, strategy games, and competitive e-sports (Eklund, 2016; Kowert et al., 2017; Paaßen et al., 2017; Vermeulen and Van Looy, 2016). The stereotype of female gamers' incompetence is particularly pronounced in multiplayer online games, such as *Overwatch* and *League of Legends*, where female gamers are often assigned to play support or healer characters. These roles are commonly viewed as easier to play, align with established gender norms, and reinforce the stereotype of female gamers' dependency on male gamers (Austin, 2022; Ratan et al., 2015).

Despite the growing body of literature on stereotyped representations of females in gaming and the gendered gaming experiences of female gamers, few studies have explored how female gamers understand everyday sexism targeting them and develop pertinent coping strategies. Common responses from female gamers include quitting (either entirely quitting video games or multiplayer games), camouflaging gender cues (muting their voice or using a voice changer to sound like a man), and showcasing advanced gaming skills (Bergstrom, 2019; Cote, 2017; Fox and Tang, 2017; McLean and Griffiths, 2019). Although existing studies note that these coping strategies are not mutually exclusive and are selectively employed depending on the social context of gaming, there has not yet been further clarification on the decision-making mechanisms female gamers use to determine when and how to react to perceived sexism in gaming.

Therefore, based on the review of existing literature, this research proposes three main research questions:

RQ 1: What do female gamers recognize as sexist in gaming?

RQ 2: How do female gamers react to perceived sexism in gaming?

RQ 3: What are the decisive factors that shape their coping strategies for sexism in gaming?

Methods

Data collection

This research draws on 40 in-depth semi-structured interviews with self-identified female gamers. Twenty-nine participants were recruited through snowball sampling, and eleven participants were recruited directly from online gaming forums and chat rooms. Considering that most popular games are produced by US and East-Asian companies, as well as the booming gaming market in the Asia-Pacific region led by the Chinese market (Gaikwad, 2022), I recruited gamers from both English-speaking and Chinese-speaking gaming communities. The first-stage recruitment focused solely on online gaming communities hosting female gamers exclusively. For English-speaking gamers, I recruited them through Discord, while for Chinese-speaking gamers, I reached out to them on Douban, a popular Chinese online forum.

Both Discord and Douban allow searching for user groups/servers dedicated to female gamers using keywords such as “female,” “gaming,” and “girl gamer.” Based on the results generated through these keyword searches, I sent requests to join highly active groups with a large number of members, specifying my intention as a researcher who has been a devoted female gamer since childhood. Despite the availability of numerous public groups on both platforms, almost all female gamers’ groups generated in my keyword search were private. Joining these groups typically required answering questions about one’s motivation for joining, gaming experiences, preferred video game genres, and favorite games, as well as confirming acceptance of community conduct rules. These rules often explicitly prohibit male users from sending application for membership and stress zero tolerance to discriminatory content, hate speech, and harassment behaviors, especially gender-based ones, in these groups designated to encourage sisterhood among fellow female gamers. In more strictly guarded groups, I was required to send a freshly taken picture of myself holding a piece of paper, on which I wrote down designated content to prove my female identity. Although most groups I have been granted access to acknowledge gender fluidity and LGBTQIA+ rights, group moderators often hold the ultimate power to decide whether any applicant or member identifying as female is a bad-faith impersonator, and to expel these “moles” for the sake of collective interests. These admission procedures suggest that members want to create a safe haven from hostile male intrusion and imply that gender is a crucial factor shaping their gaming experiences.

Due to a low response rate and repeated rejections from group moderators denying my entrance into their exclusive communities, I shifted to snowball sampling as the second stage of interviewee recruitment. A plausible reason for the substantial difficulty in accessing these female-only online gaming communities could be a sense of vulnerability resulting from the marginalized and stigmatized image of female gamers. Snowball sampling was more effective as this method functions on a basic level of trust between the participants and me.

Interviews were conducted from late January 2023 to late March 2023. Potential participants were informed that there could be questions about their traumatic experiences as female gamers, but they were free to refuse to answer specific questions or to stop the

interview at any time. All interviews were conducted online using Zoom or WeChat's live chat functions, lasting an average of one hour. After I completed all interviews, audio files were transcribed, and all identifying information was removed from the transcripts. Participants chose their preferred pseudonyms, while some pseudonyms were changed to ensure complete confidentiality. After transcription, interview data were transferred to MAXQDA, version 22.5.0, a qualitative analysis software, for coding and identification of themes. For RQ1 and RQ2, three themes were generated for each, which were presented as subtitles in the Findings section: "*Gaming content/Interaction with male gamers/The broader gaming community*" (RQ1) and "*Prevention/Reluctance in recognition/Reluctance in confrontation*" (RQ2).

Interview questions

At the start of each interview, I deliberately asked general and open-ended questions about participants' gaming experiences. I avoided asking about specific scenarios in which female gamers encountered particular forms of sexism they have experienced, which might have led participants to "translate" their original thoughts to fit predefined patterns. For example, instead of asking "Have you been sexually harassed/discriminated for your gaming skills/gatekept from gamers' circles?" I invited participants to recall, "Is there anything that makes you uncomfortable, confused, or offended as a woman who plays video games?" The flexibility of interview questions thus allowed me to identify and analyze a two-step process in confronting discrimination: first, recognizing the existence of discrimination, and then reacting.

Participant characteristics

Among the 40 participants, aged 20 to 63 years, 39 hold at least a bachelor's degree. Apart from 21 students, the rest have white-collar, middle-class jobs, such as dentist, teacher, aircraft engineer, and business analyst. The sample's education level and employment status should be considered in further interpretation of interview data. Participants are scattered across the world, with most living in China (n=18) and North America (n=14), while the rest reside in European countries (n=5) and Asia-Pacific countries (n=3).

Two additional characteristics of this sample should be considered for data analysis beyond demographic information. First, since snowball sampling relies on interpersonal trust, participants often know those who referred them to me relatively well in real life. This suggests that playing or discussing video games serves as a channel for them to connect with close social relationships in real life, apart from interacting with strangers on the Internet. Second, the female gamers interviewed in this research were highly diverse in their preferences, habits, and experiences with video games. Rather than focusing on stereotypical "hardcore" gamers, I aimed for a more inclusive sample, extending the recruitment eligibility to any self-identified woman who regularly plays any type of video game. Thus, participants reported playing games from diverse genres, from highly interactive e-sports games like *League of Legends*, *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six Siege*, and *Overwatch* to single-player triple-A productions like *Legend of Zelda* and

Assassin's Creed, indie productions such as *Hollow Knight* and *Disco Elysium*, and popular mobile games including *Genshin Impact* and *Arknights*. They also invest varying amounts of time and money in gaming and assign different levels of importance to gaming in their lives.

Findings

What is recognized as sexist or misogynistic by female gamers?

Gaming content. In both single-player and multiplayer games, the content itself, independent of gamers' behaviors, has been recognized as a primary source of perceived sexism and misogyny by female gamers. All participants expressed varying degrees of discomfort with the hypersexualization of female bodies in game art. Some explicitly commented that certain camera angles, such as zooming into the twerking hips of female characters, serve only to gratify male gamers' voyeuristic pleasure. This is particularly evident when female characters are playable or gamers can control the view, suggesting that such interactive functions are designed to satisfy the erotic "male gaze" (Mulvey, 1989). Apart from hypersexualization, many participants also complained about the oversimplification of female characters into stereotypical sub-types, such as innocent, submissive "virgins" and seductive, manipulative "vamps" (Fox and Bailenson, 2009). A few participants who played games specifically marketed to a female audience, such as dating simulation games, felt particularly disappointed when they discovered that these productions did not attempt to represent the target consumers in more nuanced and realistic ways, but rather perpetuated the sexist imaginations prevalent in male-dominated games.

Interactions with male gamers. Three patterns of male gamers' sexist behaviors were most mentioned in the interviews. The first is the use of insulting, misogynistic epithets, such as "bitch" and "cunt," commonly cited as "trash-talking" by participants. The second is treating female gamers as sexual resources. Some participants reported exposure to straightforward verbal harassment in games' built-in chat functions, while a few others described traumatizing experiences of their avatars being sexually assaulted by unknown male gamers' avatars, such as mimicking sexual intercourse movements in MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games). Participants also recounted sexual harassment outside of gameplay, such as receiving unsolicited relationship requests, requests to send selfies to gamers' group chats, or suggestions about launching an "e-girl" live-stream channel (stigmatized as equivalent to soft porn; see Ruberg et al., 2019). Lastly, almost all participants with experiences in competitive multiplayer online games expressed frustration with being discredited for their gaming competence. In addition to being assigned support roles, as seen in previous studies (Austin, 2022; Ratan et al., 2015), participants frequently cited experiences of being the first to be blamed for losing and being expected to follow male teammates' commands, based on the stereotype that female gamers are always the weakest link in a team (Fox and Tang, 2014).

The broader gaming community. For the previous two sources of perceived sexism in gaming, participants' recognition is based on direct exposure. However, an especially important finding for game studies researchers is that participants also identified indirect exposure as a crucial source of perceived sexism in gaming. When asked about their gaming experiences, participants often referred to what they observed in the broader gaming community on the Internet, such as online forums, social media, video-sharing sites, and live-stream platforms hosting fellow gamers and gaming content. Participants noted that sexism and misogyny pervaded these online spaces, particularly in two forms: fantasizing about fictional female characters in games, female gamers, or female public figures in the industry as sexual objects, and discrediting female gamers' knowledge and skills, as well as those of female producers. Immersed in the hostile atmosphere towards women in the gaming community and constantly witnessing the treatment of other self-identified female gamers, participants exhibited a keen awareness of themselves as unwelcome intruders in a boys' club, recognizing their participation in gaming as inherently risky. One participant, Mousse, shared her lesson learnt on an online forum:

"I was once looking for some guidance for playing *Monster Hunter* on one forum, and I found an extremely detailed post written by a user who made it clear in the post that she was female. However, people didn't believe her in the comment section, posting things like 'stop cheating bros here' and 'stop pretending to be trans.' They don't care about the post itself, probably because the post itself was alright or they would definitely flame it for 'girls don't have any understanding about serious gaming.' To be honest, I couldn't be 100% sure about the author's gender as well. But men just can't think of the possibility of women being able to do well with hardcore video games. I won't try to reveal myself for sure after this."

Mousse's takeaway is alarming for this research. She decided to make herself invisible not because she was directly attacked, harassed, or judged by male gamers, but because she recognized such possibilities. Indirect exposure to sexism in gaming discourages female gamers as much as direct exposure. This aligns with earlier studies on women's use of public spaces, which found that they constrain their behaviors or limit their entrance into public spaces, fearing potential harassment or other forms of gender-based abuse (Gardner, 1995; Valentine, 1989). More importantly, participants' understanding of their "gaming experience" emphasizes that contemporary gaming extends beyond the act of playing to encompass a broader digital media ecosystem featuring video games. While individual female gamers may avoid personal confrontation with sexist male gamers, it is unlikely that they can entirely isolate themselves from the pervasive sexist gaming culture infiltrating contemporary digital society. This effective intimidation of female participation in digital spaces (Gray et al., 2017; Sobieraj, 2018) shapes two major coping strategies cited by participants: avoiding playing with strangers and camouflaging one's female identity.

How female gamers react to perceived sexism in gaming, and why?

Prevention. Consistent with previous studies on female gamers' reactions to sexism in gaming, two major patterns emerged among my participants: quitting and gender-masking (Bergstrom, 2019; Buyukozturk, 2022; Cote, 2017; Fox and Tang, 2017;

McLean and Griffiths, 2019). Several participants who reported playing mostly single-player games, or only single-player games like *The Legend of Zelda* and *The Witcher*, explicitly stated that they chose to play alone to avoid encountering sexist male strangers. However, many other participants adopted a less thorough quitting strategy by only playing when accompanied by people they knew in real life. By surrounding themselves with trusted acquaintances, participants created a safe space for gaming, shielded from malicious strangers. A few participants noted that when playing with both strangers and acquaintances, the presence of trusted acquaintances still provided a sense of security and support against potential harassment.

For those who reported using gender-masking strategies, participants mentioned quitting voice chat, using a voice-changer, adopting gender-neutral usernames/profile pictures, and writing chat messages in a non-feminine tone. These strategies also served to avoid personal contact with potentially sexist strangers. Participants emphasized that their primary goal should be prevention, rather than reaction. The notion of risk management frequently appeared in their pragmatic decision-making: aware of normalized sexism in gaming, participants characterized confrontational efforts against hostile male gamers as futile and exhausting in a “minefield” of gender-based online abuse.

“Maybe you can cope with it one or two times. That’s fine. But can you do it every time you meet some jerk? These people are everywhere. There will always be people like that. You can’t possibly fight them all. There’s no way to win in the long run.” (Knight)

“If you really want to have justice, then there’s a tough battle for you to fight, no matter if you want to set it in private, making him apologize or whatever, or you want to have him punished. He can simply say whatever happens to appear in his mind, but you need to spend time and energy dealing with it. The costs for the two sides are so unequal.” (Sapphire)

Prioritizing prevention as a strategy is profoundly shaped by participants’ indirect exposure to rampant sexism and misogyny in gaming. Several participants who exiled themselves from multiplayer games had never even tried playing such games, as they perceived gender-based online abuse to be omnipresent and inevitable for individual female gamers. While minimizing the possibility of exposing their female identity to sexist male strangers in gaming, such pragmatic dodging strategies also render them largely invisible to their male counterparts. Although the prevention strategy gains relative security for individual female gamers’ daily gaming experiences, it solidifies the stereotype that women are not interested in gaming and further contributes to the reproduction of male dominance in gaming.

Reluctance in recognition. Apart from the option of reporting offensive conduct to gaming platforms, which does not require personal interaction with the perpetrator, participants commonly expressed reluctance to react against perceived sexism on the spot. This reluctance, implied by their prioritization of prevention strategies, was evident at both cognitive and behavioral levels, resulting in a two-stage process of hesitant response to sexism in gaming. To confront discrimination or prejudice, one must first recognize its existence (Ashburn-Nardo et al., 2008). However, many participants were ambivalent

about labeling what made them uncomfortable as sexism or misogyny, understanding that “they don’t mean to hurt” (Danny). Participants proactively evaluated the intentions behind perceived offenses, using the presence of conspicuous malice as the standard for reaction. While they were more assertive about the necessity to speak out against perceived hostile sexism, they were much more reluctant to challenge perceived benevolent sexism or unintentional offenses.

Several participants used male gamers’ offers to “carry” them (as burdens yet still win the game) as examples of modern chivalry in gaming. Although they admitted feeling uncomfortable with the assumption of female gamers’ incompetence, they still concluded that they would not turn down the offer immediately to avoid spoiling the friendly atmosphere, which might “accidentally injure someone who actually comes with good will” (Swan). While some participants did not explicitly label such offenses as sexism, others did frame their experiences as sexism. However, conscious of the normalization of sexism in gaming, they understood perpetrators’ behaviors as fundamentally shaped by the environment and thus unintentional. This acceptance of normalized sexism was particularly observed in participants’ reflections on encounters with strange but not explicitly lewd relationship requests from unknown male gamers, due to the longstanding stereotype of male gamers being socially awkward and clueless about romantic relationships.

“A lot of male gamers are nerds. They don’t know how to communicate with girls. After all, they are not charming boys . . . They act in that way because of the environment’s influence . . . You can’t really expect them to break from it.” (Tequila)

Reluctance in confrontation. The distinction between hostile sexism and benevolent or unintentional sexism serves as a crucial factor in participants’ recognition of sexism in their gaming experiences. The reluctance to confront perceived benevolent or unintentional sexism was particularly emphasized and explained by almost all participants. Aware of the sexist discourse surrounding female gamers, many participants commented that challenging non-explicit sexism would make them appear as overly sensitive “feminist killjoys,” an identity even more prone to hostile retaliation (Ahmed, 2010; Braithwaite, 2014).

“I can somehow sense it, but I can’t call him out for sexual discrimination, because men just use those words all the time. I don’t want to be arbitrary. Am I too sensitive?” (Soupe)

“I wonder if it will be too self-centred for me to report everything I see offensive. I could be wrong about assuming it to be sexist or about gender.” (Young)

Furthermore, playing with trusted acquaintances, such as friends, colleagues, and boyfriends, was noted by almost all participants as a major obstacle for them to challenge perceived sexism on spot, as accusing these people of acting sexist may damage valued relationships with them. Ironically, these people were also mentioned by participants as those usually behaving sexist in non-malicious ways. Thus, two major factors that impede female gamers’ confrontation against perceived sexism coexist in

the context of playing with acquaintances: the concern of overreacting against benevolent sexism, and of potential social cost of damaging valued relationships with perpetrators. Although a few participants expressed completely opposite views on dealing with sexist acts in close personal relationships, stating that it was exactly the close connection between the two parties in real life that enabled them to speak frankly about their discontent, the overwhelming majority of participants reasoned that they felt bound by the societal expectations for women to polite and considerate. Some participants further emphasized that they felt the need to brush off sexist conducts even from “friends of friends,” who were strangers to them but introduced by mutual friends, as they reasoned that women were supposed to be primarily responsible for the maintenance of agreeable vibe. When the line between gaming and socializing becomes blurry, female gamers’ reluctance to confront sexism conforms to earlier studies on women’s preference for subtle and indirect responses to gender discrimination due to their understanding of women’s responsibility to politeness (Brinkman et al., 2011; Prentice and Carranza, 2002).

By retreating to private circles, female gamers manage to ensure baseline-level security from direct exposure to overtly hostile sexism through intentionally shaping their gaming experience as a juxtaposition between online and offline. However, they also face greater difficulty defending themselves against less violent forms of sexism. Participants were conscious of the dual dimensions of gender roles they were expected to assume in gaming: presumed outsiders of (serious) gaming and expected to act amicably and gently, not only in gaming but in social interactions in general. The integration of real-life relationships further complicates female gamers’ decision-making processes in confronting sexism, as these relationships may already entail gendered power dynamics.

In recounting an in-game double date, Olive reflected on such dual dimensions of sexism: she and her female friend were expected, first, to be incapable gamers and second, to be submissive girlfriends:

“My friend, A, once told me that she and her boyfriend played with her boyfriend’s male friend, B. They lost and B started to blame her and another girl, who was A’s friend, in the voice chat. A’s boyfriend wanted to calm B down, so he actually chimed in with ‘yeah you know girls. You shouldn’t be so blunt, or they can’t handle it.’ A and her friend were super embarrassed, but neither of them could say anything. A was afraid of making things awkward between B and her boyfriend, and thus between her and her boyfriend, while A’s female friend was also afraid of making things difficult for A. So, in the end, they just let it go.” (Olive)

Jasmin, on the other hand, expressed her anxiety and frustration over a sexist suggestion from her professor, who controlled her access to a career in gaming:

“When I was in college, I participated in a game design competition with my team. I was the only girl. On the presentation day, our team supervisor joked about me dancing on the stage to leave a good impression with the judges. He was my professor! I didn’t know what I could do at that moment. Although I didn’t dance in the end, I still felt extremely stressed for a long time whenever I had to talk to him.” (Jasmin)

Olive and Jasmin's stories, along with other participants' examples, demonstrate that for female gamers, gaming is often not merely an anonymous online activity independent of the power dynamics of preexisting gendered social institutions. Instead, it is an online-offline juxtaposition that enables the reproduction of established gender inequalities. Although participants' reluctance to confront sexism succeeds in preventing escalated conflicts, their cautious deliberation on perpetrator's intention and their social relationship with the perpetrator, driven by their compelled acceptance of the status quo of male-dominated gaming, simultaneously entrenches particular expressions of sexism in gaming, and furthermore, reproduces broader gender inequalities through interpersonal exchanges in gaming.

Reproducing gender inequalities in and through gaming: Emotional management and subordinate adaptation

In studying the reproduction of gender hierarchy in gaming, Buyukozturk (2022) interpreted female gamers' commonly adopted strategies of quitting and gender-masking as "trading place for peace." This concept emphasizes female gamers' voluntary relinquishment of their entitlement to participate in public gaming spaces in exchange for a harassment-free environment. While this pattern was observed among participants in this research, the question remains whether they actually secure the desired peace, as palpable tension exists between their feelings and their reactions. For those who give up multiplayer gaming entirely, peace might naturally result from the absence of interpersonal communication in gameplay. However, indirect exposure to ubiquitous sexism in the broader gaming community is unlikely to cease. For those who still enjoy multiplayer gaming but retreat to private circles, only playing when accompanied by trusted acquaintances, peace is usually superficial. Their inner peace, on the contrary, is constantly disrupted by the dilemma of not wanting to spoil the seemingly peaceful, playful, and friendly atmosphere when gaming with benevolent but sexist acquaintances.

Schwalbe and his colleagues (2000), addressing the overarching question in sociology—"how are inequalities reproduced?"—argued that the reproduction of inequalities should be understood as dynamic, interactive processes in concrete settings, even when these inequalities appear thoroughly institutionalized. Among the four generic processes of inequality reproduction, emotional management and subordinate adaptation were widely observed in female gamers' cautious negotiation of safe spaces within the fundamentally sexist gaming community. Female gamers constantly feel compelled to regulate their emotions based on their interpretation of perceived sexism and to weigh the social cost of damaging relationships with perpetrators against the compensatory benefits of remaining silent.

Glick and Fiske (1996) argued that sexism, as an attitude toward women, is essentially ambivalent, distinguishing between benevolent sexism (BS) and hostile sexism (HS). HS seeks to dominate women, while BS emphasizes men's role in protecting women. Recent gaming studies have started to question the impact of BS on female gamers, such as the target marketing of casual games and "pink games" to female gamers (Eklund, 2016; Liu and Lai, 2022), and assigning them support roles in multiplayer

games due to females' supposedly caring nature (Austin, 2022). Among the small but growing body of literature on female gamers' coping mechanisms for sexism, this research is the first to identify that female gamers proactively and carefully differentiate between hostile sexism and benevolent sexism in their daily interactions with male gamers. Female gamers' general reluctance to confront what they perceive as unintentional or well-meaning behavior should be understood as their lack of psychological entitlement to feel angry towards subtler offenses, which constitutes extra emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983) imposed on females in gaming.

In this research, participants complained about "modern chivalry" as a major form of BS from male gamers, such as offering unsolicited guidance in gameplay, promising to "carry" them to an easy win, or easing the team's stress in competitive e-sports with condescending remarks like "it's okay if we lose since we have a girl here" (Bass) and "guys, just relax and have some fun [because there is a girl on our side]" (Swan). However, female gamers have still managed to reconcile with seemingly benevolent perpetrators and have thus accepted sexism's plausible legitimacy in gaming. The need for female gamers to interpret the intentions behind perceived sexism is so ingrained that it has almost developed into a default setting, enabling them to swiftly adjust their confrontational strategies. Almost all participants who discussed finding themselves in situations requiring a decision on whether to protest against perceived sexism emphasized the obvious existence of malice as a decisive factor in their final decision to act. However, the understanding that challenging certain kinds of sexism is less justifiable than others already signifies female gamers' compromise with normalized sexism in gaming and their acceptance of their lower status in the gaming gender hierarchy. Furthermore, it is exactly "conditioning . . . emotional subjectivity—making emotional labor a matter of habit" that compels female gamers to "collude in the reproduction of gender inequality" (Schwalbe et al., 2000: 436). By quelling their anger and distress against perceived sexism, they leave it unchallenged as norms and "objective facts" in gendered gaming. This mirrors findings from previous studies on women downplaying the severity of gender discrimination or sexual harassment in other male-dominated areas, such as professional football (Jones, 2008) and the military (Sasson-Levy, 2003), to avoid cognitive dissonance.

While many participants have taught themselves to stay composed when facing less violent sexism, several others pointed out that they were indeed frustrated but could not afford the social cost of voicing their frustrations over trivial unpleasantness in gaming, which is supposed to be a bonding, relaxing, and joyful activity. Deliberately or not, those participants understood the collaboration between BS and HS as a reward-and-punishment system (Glick and Fiske, 2001): BS rewards women for accepting the status quo, and HS punishes those who dare to challenge the gender hierarchy. Instead of being unaware of BS (Barreto and Ellemers, 2005) or endorsing BS (Gul and Kupfer, 2019; Hammond et al., 2014), participants intentionally and reluctantly chose to accept BS as a strategy of subordinate adaptation. They did not want to be recognized as "feminist killjoys" who refuse to be "happily affected by the objects that are supposed to cause happiness," thus turning them into easy targets of retaliating hostile sexism (Ahmed, 2010: 582). In the context of gaming with acquaintances, female gamers are keenly aware that their discomfort may appear inappropriate if what triggers them would always

be automatically framed as “lighthearted banter in a friendly gathering,” which thus deconstructs the defensibility of their discomfort and stigmatizes it as their distorted feelings. Failure to bridge the gap between their distorted feelings and the anticipated performance of conviviality often leads to forceful corrections, as illustrated by Hawk’s metaphor of a dance party:

“It’s like partying together in a room. People are dancing and they are excited, not really paying attention to things around them. It’s natural if someone just accidentally steps on your toe. Normally, when you say ‘Ouch! You just stepped on me!’, that guy will say something like ‘I’m sorry! Are you alright? Do you need help?’, and you say ‘Thank you, but nevermind. I’m fine,’ and it’s over. But the situation here [when complaining about sexism in gaming] is: he will be like ‘Why are you so butthurt?’ That is not normal. That is frustrating.” (Hawk)

Echoing how Buyukozturk (2022) framed female gamers’ subordinate adaptation as “trading place for peace,” the core logic of my participants’ strategic acquiescence to acquaintances’ sexist offenses is still “trading.” Instead of giving up “place,” participants pragmatically negotiated their appropriate social place (Clark, 1990) in male-dominated gaming and other gendered contexts of social interaction while trading power and respect under unequal terms. Weighing costs and benefits is typical “trading” behaviors in subordinate adaptation (Good et al., 2012), and balancing the goal of being liked and the goal of being respected is particularly widely observed in people’s decision-making mechanisms when they find themselves being discriminated against in interpersonal relationships (Mallett and Melchiori, 2019). This is a pronounced pattern among my participants, not only because “being likable” is almost a universal requirement for women in social occasions, but also because many participants deliberately play with close friends, colleagues, or romantic partners for security concerns, which are important relationships “having a high expectation of repair (i.e., of their own self-image or reputation, others’ good will), high relationship value . . . and few relationship alternatives” (Mallett and Melchiori, 2019: 99). In these high-stakes, important relationships, participants are prone to prioritize the goal of being liked over that of being respected, and thus ignore perceived discrimination. Therefore, for female gamers, closeness with male gaming partners in real life can be a source of safety and support in gaming and their relationships, but at the same time, it can also be a barrier to standing up for themselves against sexism from those male acquaintances.

Furthermore, when gaming with acquaintances involved in high-stakes relationships, especially those involving stereotypical gender roles, such as heterosexual romance discussed by Olive and Tequila, female gamers had to double their efforts in gender performance, playing along with gender norms in two contexts simultaneously: gaming and the interpersonal relationship with that acquaintance. The results of female gamers shaping their gaming space as an online-offline juxtaposition are both reproduction of gender inequalities in gaming and reproduction of gender inequalities through gaming. Choosing not to protest against “harmless” sexist remarks, such as the “you play well for a female gamer” type of compliment, or jokes about eroticized female labor in the gaming industry, including live-streaming and cosplaying (Rouse and Salter, 2021), female gamers’ reluctance to confront sexism contributes to the long-term maintenance of gender inequalities in gaming.

Moreover, gaming is not just leisure or entertainment but a channel for socialization. Like learning and practicing sophisticated communication skills in a foreign language (Thorne et al., 2009), or leadership skills (Williams et al., 2014) through gaming, female players, particularly young women, also learn and practice executing the feminine gender through gaming. Gender inequalities rooted in other social fields, such as the frequently mentioned expectation for women to be quiet, amicable, and accommodating among participants, get transplanted to gaming scenes where real-life acquaintances are present and are further reproduced through female gamers' reluctant acquiescence to perceived sexism from seemingly benign perpetrators, suggesting alarming implications for gamers' gender attitudes. Compared to other non-participatory media, such as films and books, video games driven by algorithms function through codifying human interactions, whether with a computer or other players, and constructing feedback loops in gameplay correspondingly, which thus makes gaming disciplinary (Bogost, 2010). While media consumption, like reading romantic novels, indoctrinates women with curated representations of femininity (Radway, 2009), gaming creates a drill ground for actually "doing gender" in both virtual reality and reality, in which women's expected gender roles in the two settings are profoundly intertwined.

Conclusion

This research contributes to the broader literature on male dominance in gaming and the resultant marginalization and discrimination experienced by female gamers. Reflecting on indirect exposure to the omnipresent sexism in the gaming community, female gamers recognize that the gaming experience begins long before pressing the "start" button. Keenly aware of the normalization of sexism in gaming and the risks of openly challenging it, female gamers often retreat to safer private circles, crafting their gaming space as an online-offline juxtaposition. In this space, they must engage in gendered emotion management and calculate the social costs of offending sexist real-life acquaintances against the compensatory benefits of bearing with them. Their pragmatic self-protection strategies have managed to prevent escalated conflicts, yet their reluctance to confront sexism contributes to the reproduction of gender inequalities in gaming and other social fields through gaming as an interactive process of socialization. This invites future researchers to explore how gendered social interactions in gaming as a virtual playground affect female gamers' perceptions of gender norms compared to traditional spaces for socialization, such as schools, workplaces, and families.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting this research's findings. First, limited by the snowball sampling method, participants in this research were clustered in well-educated, middle-class backgrounds, and are not representative of the entire female gamer population. Future research might consider comparing coping strategies against sexism and decision-making mechanisms of female gamers from different socio-economic backgrounds and further explore how socio-economic background may shape female gamers' responses to sexism in gaming. Second, the interview data collected for this research suffers from participants' recall bias. As I intentionally asked broad, flexible questions to encourage participants' narration from their original perspectives, participants' memories often appeared clouded, and many details were unfortunately lost, especially when participants traced back their experiences in childhood and adolescence.

Possible solutions to recall bias may include conducting “game interviews,” in which researchers watch participants playing games and interview them immediately afterward (Schott and Horrell, 2000), inviting participants to keep “gaming diaries” (Fox et al., 2018), or recording in-game voice chats under strictly controlled experimental conditions (Kuznekoff and Rose, 2013). The third limitation of this research is its failure to capture female gamers’ responses to sexism at a collective level. Despite including participants recruited through female-only online gaming communities, those participants did not mention any coping strategies against sexism that required collective action. Given that creating safe spaces in support groups has been adopted as an important strategy among women facing sexism in gaming and, more broadly, on the Internet (Clark-Parsons, 2018; McLean and Griffiths, 2019), future research could extend the examination of individual female gamers’ responses to sexism in gaming to study how intra-group interaction among female gamers affects individuals’ responses and the potential formation of collective responses.

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