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"I bet she's 'not like other girls'": Discursive Construction of the Ideal Gaming Woman on r/GirlGamers

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Abstract

Research on women and hostile behaviour in video games has largely focused on women as victims rather than perpetuators of hostile behaviour. In this study, by utilizing discourse analysis, we examine how women's hostile behaviour is discussed in the subreddit r/GirlGamers, and how the ideal gaming woman is discursively constructed in these discussions.

Keywords

female gamers; gender; hostile behaviour; online games; Reddit

1. Introduction

Women are active game players and participants in digital gaming cultures, yet their position is often challenged. Although women are steadily becoming more visible in gaming, they often encounter not only direct gendered harassment (Fox & Tang, 2017), but also belittling, gatekeeping, and erasure (Salter & Blodgett, 2012), especially in masculinised gaming cultures such as those around competitive gaming (Friman & Ruotsalainen, 2022). They are constantly positioned as the other in game cultures, with very little room to navigate their presence, gender, and gaming expertise (Ruotsalainen & Friman, 2018; Witkowski, 2018). Women employ a variety of strategies to navigate these contested spaces, such as forming their own communities, honing their gaming skills to claim space for themselves through gaming expertise, and altogether hiding their gender (Fox & Tang, 2017).

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Because of the commonly shared difficulties, there is often solidarity between gaming women, seen in both everyday informal exchanges (Dye & Williams, 2018; Ruotsalainen & Meriläinen, 2023) and communities for women in gaming (Zhang et al., 2023), such as the not-for-profit organisation Women in Games and the popular subreddit r/GirlGamers, the latter examined in this study. However, women are obviously not a homogenous group, with individuals differing in their personal histories, their relationship with gaming, gameplay preferences and motives, and many other variables (e.g., Friman, 2022). Some embrace a strong "gamer" identity (Howe et al., 2019), others reject it altogether (Shaw, 2012), and most presumably fall somewhere in between or do not consider it a relevant positioning.

There are several prominent discourses on women's gaming, such as that on women's contested role in gaming cultures, that influence gaming women's experiences of gaming either directly or through more indirect mechanisms. Whether through personal experience, friends and family, or the media, gaming women often encounter these discourses and either willingly consider or are forced to consider their game culture experiences in relation to them. They also often become participants, reinforcing or contesting notions that are put forward.

In this study, we explore several interlinked discourses as they appear in discussions in the subreddit r/GirlGamers on the discussion platform Reddit, and how the normative ideal gaming woman is constructed—and challenged—in and through these. Focusing on discussion threads, mainly between self-identifying women, around women's negative conduct in digital gaming, we utilise critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2001) to discern how gender and gender-appropriate behaviours are discursively constructed in these discussions.

2. Background

Previous research and public discussion have comprehensively documented the many difficulties encountered by gaming women because of their gender. Digital gaming has historically been seen and constructed as a masculine space: something for boys and men (Bryce & Rutter, 2003; Schott & Horrell, 2000) with women relegated to the sidelines (e.g., Taylor et al., 2009). Scholars have extensively documented (see Vergel et al., 2023) the sexist and misogynist behaviour, such as sexual and general harassment, belittling, and exclusion, women encounter in both in-game situations and broader game culture interactions (Braithwaite, 2014; Cote, 2017; Fox & Tang, 2017; Gray et al., 2017; Salter & Blodgett, 2012; Taylor et al., 2009). This negative behaviour is typically carried out by men (Friman & Ruotsalainen, 2022), reflecting the deep-set—although challenged (e.g., Fisher & Jenson, 2017)—gendered structures of digital game cultures (Darvin et al., 2021; Salter & Blodgett, 2012), where women are still often positioned and perceived as outsiders to gaming by some gaming men (see Cote, 2017).

Despite their presence being challenged, women actively play games and participate in broader gaming culture in diverse ways. Unlike men, however, they are often made acutely aware of their gender in gaming spaces, as for example a feminine voice may provoke an unwanted response from other players (Kuznekoff & Rose, 2013; Ruotsalainen & Meriläinen, 2023) and women's gaming continues being limited for example via pressure to take on certain roles while playing (Ruotsalainen & Friman, 2018).

Especially since the 2010s (Consalvo, 2012), game academia has paid increasing attention to unwanted behaviours in-game cultures. Often discussed as "toxicity" or "toxic behaviour" (e.g., Cote et al., 2023;

Kordyaka et al., 2020; Liu & Agur, 2023), the phenomenon contains a wide range of activities from minor transgressions in gameplay to discriminatory verbal abuse, general and sexual harassment, and threats of violence. While much of this behaviour takes place in gaming situations, it also reaches beyond them, and occurs for example on gaming platforms and gaming-related social media. There is no clear-cut definition of what is considered toxic; although there is agreement on for example threats and verbal aggression, phenomena such as trolling and trash-talking often occupy a grey area, depending on individual instances and the social contract between players (e.g., Ruotsalainen & Meriläinen, 2023).

Research on the phenomenon has mainly followed one of three lines of inquiry: the experiences of individuals encountering negative behaviour (e.g., Fox & Tang, 2017; Ortiz, 2019), the causes and dynamics of negative behaviour (e.g., Liu & Agur, 2023; Meriläinen & Ruotsalainen, 2024), and the gendered nature of hostile behaviour, with women typically the victims (Vergel et al., 2023). While existing research offers a rich understanding of hostile and discriminatory behaviour in game cultures, it has usually not addressed women's own transgressive behaviour.

The focus on women as victims is warranted based on considerable evidence (e.g., Kuznekoff & Rose, 2013; McLean & Griffiths, 2019; Salter & Blodgett, 2012; Vergel et al., 2023), yet we nevertheless find this approach problematic, as it may unintentionally narrow women's acceptable position in game cultures to primarily that of a victim, reducing their agency and reinforcing normative expectations of women's submissive behaviour (Fox & Tang, 2014; Salter & Blodgett, 2012). It can furthermore hide intersectional differences (see Crenshaw, 1991), flattening the complicated and multifaceted structural, cultural, and personal positions players occupy, and consequently result in ignoring power differences which are not solely determined by gender nor the same for every one of the same gender (Ortiz, 2019). Considering the norms of negative conduct present in many gaming environments (Hilvert-Bruce & Neill, 2020; Meriläinen & Ruotsalainen, 2024), it is unsurprising that gaming women can also behave in a negative manner, which we turn to next.

2.1. Women's Negative Conduct in Gaming

The much greater volume of men's hostile online gaming behaviour can obscure women's behaviour, and indeed this seems to have happened in research on the topic. Although researchers have occasionally brought up women's hostile responses while addressing women's reactions to harassment (Cote, 2017; Gray, 2018; Ruotsalainen & Meriläinen, 2023), the focus has usually been on coping strategies (see also Fox & Tang, 2017) instead of women's reactive or proactive negative gaming conduct.

In their interviews of gaming women, Cote (2017), Gray (2018), and Ruotsalainen and Meriläinen (2023) have all identified in-game conduct that can be described as negative, aggressive, or hostile. While all studies noted that this was typically a reaction to encountering harassment from men, the women interviewed by Ruotsalainen and Meriläinen also discussed their proactive negative conduct in reaction to neutral in-game events, such as players on their team performing poorly, in line with common, non-gendered negative gaming conduct (Kordyaka et al., 2020).

As Cote (2017, p. 148) puts it, aggressive online gaming conduct can be a double-edged sword for women. When reacting to harassment, it can be a way to defend oneself and shut down harassers, especially when combined with gaming skills superior to theirs (see also Gray, 2018), thus potentially becoming an empowering

experience (Ruotsalainen & Meriläinen, 2023). However, it may also cause the aggressively behaving woman to be accused of being overly emotional, drawing on historical negative stereotypes of women (Cote, 2017). Aggressive conduct can also escalate an already charged situation, reinforce norms of negative conduct in games, and be a source of regret and guilt once the emotionally intense moment has passed (Ruotsalainen & Meriläinen, 2023).

Despite the solidarity between gaming women mentioned previously, hostile encounters between women, sometimes containing misogyny, also happen in games (Dye & Williams, 2018; Ruotsalainen & Meriläinen, 2023). Previous research (Dye & Williams, 2018; McCullough et al., 2020) has suggested that internalised misogyny or internalised sexism, the phenomenon of women enacting learned sexist or misogynist behaviours upon themselves or other women (Bearman et al., 2009), is an important component of these negative interactions. Indeed, in Dye and Williams' (2018) data there were many examples of women holding sexist and misogynist views of other gaming women or interpreting their actions through the lens of such views.

3. Data and Method

The data of this study consists of 57 discussion threads on the subreddit r/GirlGamers on the discussion platform Reddit. This English language subreddit is an established one, created in 2010 and with over 250,000 members at the time of writing (233,000 during data collection). The description of the subreddit at the time of writing this article was as follows:

> A place for gamers who also happen to be women, probably. A delightfully polarizing term for women who game. This is a community space for ladies to hang out, talk about gaming, and game together. We also discuss topics around women in geek culture and debrief about experiences that occur as a result of their gender. Or you know, just post some bad ass makeup tutorials inspired by video games. We like that stuff here! Folks of all genders and identities welcome to join discussions here!

The original selection was conducted by manually searching for threads with the search terms "aggressive women," "angry women," "hostile women," and "toxic women," and including those in which the initial poster discussed women's conduct in gaming, either their own or others'. We searched threads without any limitation on when the threads were published, amounting to the oldest threads being 10 years old and the newest from 2023. Data was collected starting from October 2023 and continued until the authors estimated that saturation in terms of insight had been reached.

In total, 81 discussion threads were initially collected. During the analysis, 24 discussion threads were removed, as there was no discussion on women's hostile behaviour in in-game situations or gaming contexts in these. After collection, a critical discourse analysis was conducted on the data. Critical discourse analysis is a method to examine how social structures are manifested in language, with particular focus on identifying relationships of power and control (e.g., van Dijk, 2001). According to Wodak (2002), "[critical discourse analysis] takes a particular interest in the ways in which language mediates ideology in a variety of social institutions" (p. 9). Analysing discourses is done by taking into account linguistic patterns and choices (such as words used) present in the text, tracing how text is linked to a larger context, and by recognizing the ideological processes and hegemonic structures in which the discourse is embedded in, as

well the way these are resisted via struggles over power and normativity (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000; Fairclough, 1995).

In our analysis, we focused on how hostility, toxicity, and aggression were defined and how gender and gender-appropriate behaviours were discursively constructed in relation to these. For the analysis, all the collected discussion threads were read through by the first author multiple times. Atlas.ti was then utilised in coding the data for identifying re-occurrent themes and linguistic devices present. The first author then worked on identifying the number of prominent interdiscursive discourses and counterdiscourses in the data. As part of these, she traced down different discursive positionings of others and self-positionings in the data (see Harré & Van Langenhove, 2010). Also, the discursive construction of in-groups and out-groups in the data was analysed, paying particular attention to who can be considered as part of the in-group in r/GirlGamers and who, in particular what kind of women, become positioned as out-group. Furthermore, the use of stereotypes and terms such as "pick me girls" and gendered discourses surrounding them was analysed. The initial analysis was shared with author two and was further advanced via mutual discussion and in reflection with research literature.

Using social media postings as data requires care and consideration from the researcher (see Zimmer, 2020). As Reddit is a public platform, requiring for instance no signing-in to read the posts, it can be reasonably assumed that the posters were aware that their posts were public. As such, we did not obtain consent from posters. As our data consists of public posts addressing a relatively non-sensitive everyday topic (gaming experiences) in a large subreddit, we estimated there was very little risk of harm for participants. We have, however, in the interest of participants' privacy, omitted user handles and direct quotes which could be seen as containing sensitive information. Such quotes include for example mentions of posters' private life or mental health.

4. Analysis

In our analysis, we traced the way women in r/GirlGamers discuss their own and other women's hostile behaviour in video games. We examined how "gaming woman" is a gendered discursive construct and how displays of women's aggressive behaviour were discussed within the discourses identified. We identified a total of four interconnected discourses in which women's aggressive behaviour and expectations of how to perform gender were constructed in different, albeit often overlapping ways:

1. Women's behaviour interpreted through a gendered lens;
2. Women should support each other;
3. Games before gender;
4. Women can and should be aggressive.

Throughout our analysis, we have analysed parts of texts that have been taken unedited from the posts. While many of the posters use the word "girl" to refer to women players, we have elected to use the word "woman" for clarity, unless referring to a particular text where the term "girl" is used.

The prominent use of the term "girl" as well as the name of the subreddit, r/GirlGamers, is in itself an interesting gendered construct worth of analysis. Especially when discussing adult women, the term girl can

be problematic: It comes off with a sexist connotation and can be used to diminish and infantilise women (Kleinman, 2002). In our material, many discussants used the term "girl" freely (even when discussing adults), but some discussants expressed a dislike for the terms "girl," "girl gamer," and "gamer girl," as they perceived them potentially belittling towards women. The ambiguous position the term "girl gamer" occupies appears to be recognised and played with in the description of the subreddit. As displayed in the earlier section, the subreddit is described as follows:

> A place for gamers who also happen to be women, probably. A delightfully polarizing term for women who game.

Here the term "girl gamer" is recognised as polarizing. Indeed, in the description of the subreddit the term "girl" is not used, but rather the terms "women" and "ladies." The use of the terms "girl" and "girl gamers" can, however, also be seen as an attempt to claim back the term, in a similar manner that has been done with terms like "queer" (Rand, 2014). As it is largely agreed that this kind of claiming can be made only by the group that is originally targeted by the term, we as researchers (of which one is a cisgender man) are not in a position to use the terms "girl" and "girl gamer" in this manner in this context.

Next, we will give an overview of the discussions and then focus on the following prevailing discourses: "Women's behaviour interpreted through a gendered lens" and "women should support each other." After this, we examine contesting discourses or counterdiscourses ("games before gender" and "women can and should be aggressive") to these prominent discursive positions.

4.1. "This Happens to Me All the Time": An Overview of the Discussions

Most of the discussion threads we analysed were started by women-identifying posters discussing their experiences of hostile women they had encountered while playing games. In these threads, discussants would often share their own experiences and talk about actions they understood to be hostile and speculate on reasons for other women's hostile behaviour. What were seen as hostile actions varied from outright verbal slurs and sexist comments to what was experienced as being purposefully ignored:

> This happens to me all the time (I play *Fortnite*). Every time I join a random fill game and there's a girl, she will ignore me when I try to converse with her or will speak over me to other boys in our party.

Ignoring, refusing to help, and refusing to play with were some of the most common ways other women were perceived as being toxic, mentioned up to 24 times in different accounts of other women's toxicity. Ignoring was also one of the common ways women said they themselves dealt with other toxic women.

Discussants also pointed out more subtle ways hostile behaviour was part of their encounter with other women, such as talking behind one's back and refusing to help in-game. Occasionally, hostile actions would take place in social settings around the games, such as Discord servers, or develop over a longer period, in settings such as MMO (massively multiplayer online) games' guilds.

Participants in these discussions would at times also discuss their own negative conduct. This conduct was usually, albeit not always, discussed as a way to react to hostility targeted at them. Women would also share tips and strategies on how to cope with hostile women playing games. The actions described varied from

muting, blocking, and reporting to forms of mockery and sarcasm as well as calling out toxic behaviour. This tracks with how previous research has described how women players cope with hostile players in general (Cote, 2017; Ruotsalainen & Meriläinen, 2023). Next, we will discuss more in detail how normative and non-normative femininity is constructed in the material through two prevalent discourses.

4.2. "It's Internalized Misogyny at Its Best": Women's Conduct Interpreted Through a Gendered Lens

The most prominent discourse present in our data was interpreting other women's conduct through a gendered lens. Commonly, this drew from a shared understanding among discussants of games as spaces dominated by men, where women have to, consciously or unconsciously, navigate their existence:

> The sad truth is—until society stops perceiving women as incapable, stupid, weak etc. there are always going to be "not like other girls" women who are trying to avoid negative stigma by distancing themselves from women. Rather than male-seeking, most of those women assume the best way not to be harassed/associated with negative things women are portrayed as is through showing others that they are not like those weak, incapable women. It's internalized misogyny at its best.

It was often seen that, because women were navigating patriarchal spaces which are also known to be toxic towards women, they would sometimes start internalising misogyny by accepting sexist attitudes and values towards women and acting accordingly (Bearman et al., 2009). As the above quote demonstrates, this was seen as a way for some women to protect themselves. This was considered especially typical for young women, and age was considered a factor in this type of behaviour.

A closely related and often overlapping discourse was interpreting women's hostile behaviour directly in relation to men. As above, a key to understanding women's behaviour is understanding it as gendered behaviour, but here the focus slightly shifts to women's negative behaviour being directly seen as, or implied to be, a way of seeking validation and attention from men. This echoes the policing and questioning of the legitimacy of "titty streamers" (women game streamers whose self-presentation is seen as too sexualised; Ruberg et al., 2019), the construction of the shallow "fangirl" (Gerrard, 2022; Yodovich, 2021), and even the idea of the "groupie," the music fan more interested in sex with male musicians than the music itself (see Gerrard, 2022):

> Thank you! I actually posted something similar a while back, about how to deal with girls online, especially in gaming settings. My experiences have been quite negative, where the girls are just so obviously thirsting over male validation and wouldn't shut up about sexual things. I'm ok with sex jokes, I'm ok with a lot of jokes. But sometimes you can just tell it's for attention.

In a similar vein, many discussants argued that women experienced other women as a threat as they were used to being the only woman around. Other women, it was argued, might take away male validation and attention and this accounted for their hostile behaviour. Simultaneously, women who were assumed to be seeking male validation online were often described as insecure. Part of this was also policing other women's sexuality:

> My main identifier when it comes to sex jokes is whether they do it in a way that they think will get the guy back off. Like with some of my friends I go along with sexual jokes they make about me because

> within 2 seconds of me doing so they get super grossed out and give up. If they just do it to flirt with the guys…it is definitely a red flag.

Here sex jokes are only seen as appropriate as a defensive measure, to have the men back off. While this is understandable given the harassment gaming women are subjected to, reading flirtatious behaviour as a "red flag" (i.e., a warning sign) further enforces the idea that the wrong kinds of women utilise their femininity, and in this case sexuality, to garner attention from men, and potentially benefit through that. Positioned in this way, flirtatious behaviour for any other reason (similar to hostile behaviour) becomes impossible. Seeking male validation and distancing oneself from outward markers and behaviours traditionally seen as feminine (e.g., wearing makeup) was seen as especially typical for young women and connected to the insecurity of being a young woman in a patriarchal society. Because of this, it was also believed that women and girls could grow out of being a "pick me girl," a woman seeking male validation by putting other women down, and that this was a preferred outcome.

In the first quote below, the discussant distances herself from these young women and her own younger self, implying that she has matured and left these unwanted behaviours, as well as the associated insecurity and need for male validation. The second quote, another poster both reinforces the narrative of insecurity as the main reason for women's toxicity, and uses "not like other girls" to posit these women as an out-group in relation to women in the r/GirlGamers subreddit:

> Internalized misogyny is real. I also love cute things and I am very girly, even if I really dislike heels and make up. I was also, in my teenage years, a "not like other girls" kind of girl, so I really understand both sides. It has a lot to do with insecurity and the need for male validation, specially in a male-dominated group, where another woman can be viewed as "competition." Sadly, there isn't much you can do, because it's not on you to educate these women. Sometimes people grow out of that. Sometimes they don't.

> It often is down to the "not like other girls" complex with those particular type of female players, which stems from serious insecurity on their part; they lash at other female players because they perceive them as some sort of threat.

"Not like other girls" functions both as a stereotype and meme and is often used in social media and popular culture to refer to women who insist that they are not like other women, are not interested in traditionally feminine things, and seek to distance themselves from other women (Means, 2021). In the material analysed, terms such as "pick me girls," "not like other girls," "queen bees," "highlanders," and "termite queens" were used rather interchangeably and as shorthands to refer to women who seek male attention and validation and were mean to other women (see Procope Bell, 2023). At times, these terms were explained, and, for instance, internalised misogyny was explicitly posited as part of them, but often they were used as a way to quickly make a point or categorise a person, relaying to others an implicit understanding of them. These essentialising and othering labels often sufficed in terms of analysing the negative behaviour, leading to a lack of consideration of alternative explanations. These terms and the discourses surrounding them were used to construct the wrong kind of gaming woman, and discussants expressed outrage if these terms were utilised towards them to question their own gaming motives.

Many discussants also brought up the sentiment that the wrong kind of gaming women made gaming more difficult for other women by reinforcing sexist stereotypes. Despite calls for women's solidarity, "pick me girl" and the other othering terms were commonly utilised to construct the antithesis of the ideal gaming woman, allowing discussants to distance themselves from this negative stereotype and reinforce a feeling of community through a shared Other, the out-group of "pick me girls." This, however, shifts the focus of criticism from sexist structures to individuals.

The term "girl gamer" was more ambiguous in our data, but it was present: Below we can see the use of the term "girl gamer" in a negative manner, where being a woman is associated with being bad at the game and excluded from the act of play. As this is said by another woman, it suggests that "girl gamer" is not just any woman playing games, but a particular kind of woman, in this case someone who is perceived as lacking skill. As such, the woman using "girl gamer" as a slur can be seen distancing herself from a particular construction of femininity in gaming:

> When I played *Halo 3* competitively I was on vc [voice chat] w[ith] some of my friends. Randomly one girl started shit talking me like "Oh we have a gIrL gAmER, you're so bad go somewhere else!" and just calling me names.

The tension between solidarity and distancing oneself from the wrong kind of gaming woman is also illustrated by the following quote: 5

> I honestly am so conflicted about this a lot. I want to change the minds of my guildies [gaming group members] that girls aren't "token girls" but humans with traits and likes and dislikes, and they are doing everything they can to perpetuate it. The feminist in me wants to support other girl gamers and work together, but how can I do this when they don't seem to get it themselves?

Here again, the ideal gaming woman is constructed in relation to other kinds of women, who perpetuate stereotypes and are not cooperative. Discursive construction of the ideal gaming woman as someone who is supportive was very visible in our data and we turn to that next.

4.3. Normative Stances: Women Should Support Other Women

Many of those sharing experiences with hostile women would describe their sense of excitement when realising they are playing with another woman, followed by a sense of disappointment or betrayal after the unfolding of hostile events. In the quote below, where the poster responds to another discussant's negative experience, there is a strong normative stance on how women ought to support other women. Should a woman fail to do that, there must be something wrong with them; they are constructed as the "failed woman" and positioned as belonging to the out-group:

> Women are meant to uplift other women. Not put them down or feel less than. That's why I don't have many girlfriends tbh. Lots of them end up being two faced. Don't let people like that get under your skin! Clearly something is not right in her head where she feels like she has to lord over people. Her problem. I'm sure youre a great person. Don't waste your feelings on people like that! <3

Discussants (over 20 in our data) often talk about the particular moment of hearing another woman's voice. In the quote below it becomes evident that it is not so much the hostile conduct, or not only the hostile conduct, that the discussants found upsetting, but in particular hostile behaviour coming from another woman:

> I think it hurts so much more because when I hear a woman I immediately feel like I have an ally and I'll be safe to speak on voice this game. The disappointment is definitely I think rooted in that aspect of thinking you've found that ally and then to be treated the way misogynistic male gamers treat you.

As mentioned above, there was a shared normative understanding among many discussants about how gaming women should support each other. This was also evident in how often the discussants offered to play with and otherwise support those women who shared their negative experiences:

> Hmu [hit me up] if you want me to drop the discord I play a variety of things!

> All I have to say is never let anyone toxic weigh you down! It's all about just finding a community that respects you for who you are! Not people who will put you down while battling their own insecurities!

These offers of support and help were often accompanied by negative remarks about the women whose hostile behaviour was under discussion, reinforcing a separation between in-group and out-group. In this way, offering help becomes a way of signalling belonging to the in-group. Women's hostile behaviour in games continues to be asserted as a personality flaw ("people who will put you down while battling their own insecurities") and the ideal gaming woman is constructed as helpful and not hostile. These appear to be related to expressions of aggression and emotion. It was common to share experiences and advice on how to deal with toxic players, and most commonly these included muting, reporting, and blocking, alongside suggestions of mocking the hostile players and commenting sarcastically on their actions. Contrary to these, outright aggression was often advised against, as it was seen both contributing to the hostile gaming cultures as well as giving the hostile players the reaction they were looking for (see Cote, 2017).

4.4. Dissenting Voices: De-Centring Gender, Games as Hostile Environments, and Allowing Women to Be Aggressive

Alongside the most dominant discourse described above, there were also a number of counterdiscourses. Counterdiscourses challenge the hegemonic discourses and create opportunities for different discursive practices (Schröter, 2018). The first dissenting discourse we identified was about de-centring gender as the lens through which women's hostility was understood; rather, a number of different reasons were suggested for hostile behaviour, such as the overall hostility of gaming environments and individual differences:

> Gamer things. People get online and just become the worst versions of themselves, and them blame every and any one else for them dying. Dont over think it, just be glad you'll never see her again—hopefully!!

> Sounds like a lot of women haters in this thread too, who are trying to claim that women are obligated to make friends with other women and are saying that anybody that for some reason does not is behaving that way to get popular with men. Women are allowed to be assholes just like men are allowed to be.

> Women are allowed to have feelings and dislike other women and even end up in conflict with other women, that does not mean that they're doing it to get popular with men.

In our data, de-centring gender allowed women to be discussed beyond their gender, granting them the right to act on emotion, to have a bad day or bad game, and also to just not be such a nice person. By widening the motives for aggression, also the way femininity can be performed is widened. This is evident in the empowering effect of being aggressive afforded to some women:

> Good on you! So many women spend so much time retreating from aggression or ensuring we're not in a situation of conflict, but sometimes it escapes from where we're bottling it all up in an explosion. Now that you've found your voice in a big big way and articulated your anger, you might actually find it easier to call out the little things on a more regular basis, in a less supercharged way.

However, while de-centring gender as a discursive practice can create opportunities to widen how femininity can be performed and help to re-situate women as not only victims but having an active agency, it also runs a very real risk of ignoring the effect of gender and discriminatory structures altogether and aligning itself with the hegemonic discourse of toxic meritocracy, a false idea that in games everyone has the same chances to succeed and matters like gender are inconsequential (Paul, 2018). This aptly highlights the current limits in discursive positions women can take while discussing women's toxicity in gaming.

5. Discussion

Discourses of negative conduct in our data reveal that an inflexible and constraining discourse moulds women's ideal or even acceptable gamerhood and self-expression. In the masculinised space of digital gaming, women need to navigate conflicting expectations: They should be aggressive enough to push back against discrimination, yet not too aggressive—especially towards other women—to avoid contributing to a "toxic gamer culture" or being labelled a "pick me girl" seeking validation from gaming men with their hostile conduct.

When directed at other women, aggressive conduct was very commonly seen as an expression of internalised misogyny (Dye & Williams, 2018; McCullough et al., 2020) and stemming from a need for validation from gaming men. There was also an element of shock and exceptionality in many of the posts discussing being the target of another woman's negative conduct, as it was seen as a breach of expected solidarity between gaming women (see Ruotsalainen & Meriläinen, 2023) and women in general, even if the poster then went on to respond to the aggression in kind or even going beyond the initial transgression.

Internalised misogyny indeed appears to play a prominent part in women's negative gaming conduct and responses to it, but it is difficult—if not impossible—to disentangle it from the complexities of individuals' negative conduct and the struggles in fan communities and subcultures related to legitimacy and gatekeeping (e.g., Yodovich, 2021). Many gaming environments are both gendered and affectively charged, and discussants were quick to label and interpret any negative conduct through the lens of gender, often harshly, as hostile women were commonly othered through the use of "pick me girl" and other similar sexist discourses. Women rarely discussed their own hostile actions as internalised misogyny—unless the hostile behaviour was in the past—but as justified, affective reaction.

Discussing internalised misogyny as something one can grow out of situates it within one's own power and distances it from the complicated networks and structures of power within which gaming women negotiate their identity and belonging. In this sense, the ideal woman constructed in the discussions is also subject to neoliberal governmentality via discourses of self-development (see Türken et al., 2015) as she needs to challenge her own internalised misogyny and become a better woman. Focusing on other women's (assumed) personal insecurities and their need for male validation and attention risks obscuring part of the discourse of internalised misogyny, namely the structural conditions in which women's negative conduct happens. This approach to framing women's hostile behaviour mostly continues to assert men's hegemonic position in relation to women while gaming but does so with little nuance. Furthermore, it starts shifting the pressure of appropriate and normatively accepted behaviour on women and has elements of policing appropriate ways to perform femininity. An especially poignant example of this is how certain, arguably sexist, discourses about women become part of framing women who act in a negative manner in video games.

Based on the discussions we studied, many instances that would likely see a gaming man labelled as a toxic gamer see a gaming woman labelled as a toxic woman, her conduct primarily explained by her gender. Ironically, this approach repeats the same sexist argument of the wrong kind of woman playing games for the wrong motives that has traditionally been used by men to gatekeep gaming culture. Whether because of being a "fake gamer" or because of internalised misogyny, the alleged "pick me girl" is a convenient target and has no place in gaming. We find this approach problematic, especially when its' often blatant misogyny is delivered wrapped in feminist rhetoric and sentiment. On a subreddit that pushes back against hegemonic, gendered constructs of the gamer and emphasises women's solidarity, a wrong kind of gaming woman is nevertheless identified.

There are a host of reasons for negative gaming conduct not dependent on gender, from having a bad day to misunderstandings between players to frustration over other players' performance (e.g., Meriläinen & Ruotsalainen, 2024; Ruotsalainen & Meriläinen, 2023). While we do not suggest that negative gaming conduct should be endorsed, our analysis raises the question of whether it is possible for women to engage in such conduct without it being seen as a distinctly gendered act, and what the implications of this are for women's agency in online gaming. The aggressively behaving woman is caught in a double bind as she risks being labelled "hysterical" by men (Cote, 2017) or a "pick me girl" by other women. As argued above, this also runs the risk of hiding the structural conditions in which gaming happens. Gendered inequalities are often deeply embedded in the technologies themselves and infrastructures surrounding them (Ford & Wajcman, 2017).

A final point of consideration is the tricky position of game scholars addressing women's gaming. How do we continue to explore women's gaming, including the gendered issues women encounter, without contributing to the exceptionalising and othering of gaming women by framing gender as the core—or even sole—defining feature of their game culture participation? The sentiment has been voiced in the context of the game industry (Myöhänen, 2023), and a similar phenomenon has been observed in other masculinised cultures in which women occupy a marginalised position, such as the rap music scene (Rantakallio, 2021) and skateboarding (see Atencio et al., 2009). We consider there to be a very real risk of scholarly narratives inadvertently reducing gaming women to simply representatives of their gender, regardless of the volume or diversity of women's participation, and call for scholarly reflection on the topic.

Our study paints a complex picture of women's negative gaming conduct, discussion on the subject, and their connection to constructions of the ideal gaming woman. There are, however, some limitations that have to be taken into account. While a large community, r/GirlGamers captures only a tiny sliver of the population of gaming women, and the discussions we analysed in this study form a small subset of discussions by this community. Furthermore, our searches targeted only those discussions that explicitly addressed women's negative conduct, which likely resulted in data where more dramatic cases are emphasised. In many of the initial posts, the poster expressed their frustration about something that had only recently happened and which had sparked a need to share the experience with a large peer community, whether for venting, support, or both.

6. Conclusion

Our analysis captures the contradictory discourses of women's negative conduct in online gaming spaces. The discussions about women's hostile behaviour function as a site of negotiation of community norms and exclusionary criteria by suggesting appropriate ways of performing femininity and gendered gamer identity. Women's aggression and hostility are commonly framed by other women as gendered acts and seen as expressions of internalised misogyny and seeking male validation. This leads to the construction of an ideal gaming woman who regulates their conduct and is careful to maintain solidarity with other gaming women to avoid being labelled a "pick me girl" or "queen bee." Despite being grounded in feminist ideals, the construction potentially adds a further layer of gendered expectations on gaming women, constraining their agency.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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