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**”I FIND IT FUNNY THAT WOMEN HAVE
TO COME UP WITH COPING
MECHANISMS, WHEN MEN COULD
JUST NOT BE MEAN”:**

Gendered harassment in online multiplayer games

ABSTRACT

Roosa Kuja-Kyyny: "I find it funny that women have to come up with coping mechanisms, when men could just not be mean": Gendered harassment in online multiplayer games

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The aim of this thesis was to explore and discuss the gendered harassment women face in online multiplayer video games. The research questions were "*Does harassment affect female players gaming habits?*" and "*Have female players come up with coping mechanisms trying to avoid and counter harassment?*". Since online multiplayer video games are still stereotypically seen as men's hobby, this thesis focused on the experiences of female players using feminist theory. The data for this thesis was gathered through an online survey, from people who identified as female players. The collected data was then analyzed by using reflexive thematic analysis. Created themes were connected to earlier studies on the same topic, utilizing narrative literature review, to discuss the experiences of female players in more detail.

The results of this thesis show that female players do encounter harassment directly connected to their gender. This thesis also shed light on women's gaming habits, for example in relation to the use of different coping mechanisms to avoid being harassed. These kind of coping mechanisms involved hiding ones gender and avoiding using in-game chats. Further, the results indicated the need to keep working on creating safer gaming spaces, not for only women, but for everyone.

Suggestions for further research based on this study revolve around the so-called Queen Bee phenomenon and how women might join men in harassing other women in online multiplayer games. Ideally, finding solutions for harassment in general would be integral.

Keywords: harassment, online multiplayer games, video games, female players

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Preface

I want to thank my boyfriend and my family for being supportive when I did not have faith in myself. This thesis would have never seen the daylight without the support of my dearest sister Laura, who provided observations throughout the writing process. A special thank you also for my supervisors Elisa Wiik and Essi Taino for guiding me through this process and providing me with valuable feedback on the text.

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1 INTRODUCTION

In this master's thesis, I will take a look into the gendered harassment female players face and the adopted 'coping mechanisms' they use when attempting to avoid and counter harassment in online multiplayer video games. In the first chapter, I will introduce the topic of this thesis and discuss the motivation behind this topic.

The earliest stages of studying gender and its effects on gaming were motivated by the assumption that girls simply are not interested in playing video games (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998). By assuming that girls were not interested in gaming or did not participate in it, those who really were involved, both girls and women, were ignored and further pushed away from the gaming culture (Friman, 2022, p. 131). It has been suggested that there are gender-based trends in gaming preferences; for instance, some studies (see e.g. van Reijmersdal et al., 2013; Lange et al., 2021) indicate that girls may be more likely to play life simulation games such as *The Sims* or casual problem-solving and puzzle games like *Tetris*. While gaming preferences vary widely between individuals regardless of the gender, some research has found that women statistically tend to prefer the so-called pink-games more (see Vermeulen et al., 2011.) According to Bergstrom (2019) pink-games are marketed in a way that they are unappealing to male audience. These preferences then lead to women being perceived as a minority in online gaming spaces, even though research suggests that the number of men and women players is relatively equal (Fox & Tang, 2017). Minorities tend to receive more toxic attention and harassment from fellow players purely based on their gender or their sexuality (Cote, 2017). Most female players in online gaming communities report experiencing toxic and offensive language or experiences of verbal abuse (Ekiciler et al., 2022).

Female players are less likely to identify as "gamers" themselves than male players, even if both spend a similar number of hours playing games. This reflects the gendered stigma associated with the word "gamer" (Kuss et al., 2022). Due to that negative stigma, I will be using the term female player instead of female gamer in this study.

Online gaming creates environments that provide a high level of anonymity, which can lead to people unloading one's frustration on others (Gan et al. 2024; Meriläinen & Ruotsalainen, 2024). While anyone can experience harassment and hostile encounters in online gaming spaces, women report experiencing more severe forms of toxicity specifically based on their gender. Women who play are often advised to not disclose their gender to avoid discrimination and harassment while playing online multiplayer games. Hiding your gender from your game profile has been a frequently given advice for female players, when bringing up experiences of facing discrimination due to their gender. (Harrison et al., 2017.) While hiding your gender can be an effective way to protect yourself from toxicity, it also reduces the visibility of women in gaming environments; continuing to view female players as a minority does not help with making them feel like they belong and is also making it harder for them to feel accepted as a normal part of online gaming spaces. The presence of women who game publicly is essential for changing the way all women are treated in online gaming spaces (Cote, 2017) and as McLean & Griffiths point out in their 2019 article, much of the previous research on online multiplayer gaming has been done using male participants and thus there is a need for understanding the views and experiences of female players.

The motivation for conducting this study arises from my personal background in playing online multiplayer video games and witnessing, as well as experiencing, toxic and sexist behaviors directed at myself and other female players. My own experiences primarily originate from various online multiplayer games, especially *Overwatch 2*, which I have been playing passionately for approximately nine years. Having played video games for as long as I can remember, I was initially shocked by the level of sexist hostility I encountered when I began playing *Overwatch* in 2016. One might assume that after nearly a decade of hearing the same misogynistic and toxic remarks about how I don't belong in the gaming environment, but rather in the kitchen, one would have developed a thick skin and become numb to it. However, that has not been the case. Over time, I find myself increasingly questioning how, in 2025, the gaming environment remains just as, if not more, toxic than it was a decade ago.

After familiarizing myself with previous research on this topic, and thus determining how to phrase the questions, the research questions were formulated as follows:

1. Does harassment affect female players gaming habits?
2. Have female players come up with coping mechanisms trying to avoid and counter harassment?

In the next chapter I will provide a brief overview of existing literature on toxicity in gaming culture. The chapter will also briefly discuss the effects of GamerGate and its effects on female players experiences and provide a summary of gaming culture.

2 OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE ON TOXICITY AND GAMING CULTURE

In this chapter, gaming as a hobby will be contextualized, and the concept of online multiplayer gaming will be defined. Additionally, gaming culture will be examined from a gender minority perspective. Finally, the terms *toxicity*, *sexism* and *harassment* will be explained, along with how they are connected to gaming.

Online multiplayer games can be brutal places for anyone who delves into them. The reasons behind it are complex, but the nature of the multiplayer gaming sphere seems to be one of the main reasons; it is easy to place the blame of losing on someone else instead of just admitting the flaws of your own gameplay or behavior. Even though losing a game is the most common cause for toxic behavior from other players (Munn, 2023), a loss is not necessary for some players to start their toxic attack against others. That kind of behavior is referred to as *banal toxicity*; a form of everyday negative behavior, that happens “just because” (Meriläinen & Ruotsalainen, 2024). While this kind of toxic behavior can affect all players, this thesis focuses on the experiences of female players in particular. Even though generalizations are made and overall picture of women’s position in online gaming is presented, it is important to recognize that all women are individuals with unique experiences: two people can go through something similar yet perceive it entirely different ways. Also, even though this thesis is about female players’ experiences of harassment, it is important to acknowledge that male players receive harassment as well.

Even though almost half of the people who play video games are said to be women, online multiplayer games are often dominated by men (Tang & Fox, 2016). Players who are perceived to any sort of minority, related to for example their gender, ethnicity or sexuality, are more prone to facing toxicity in online multiplayer gaming (ibid.). For example, female players often receive hateful or sexist comments before the game has even fully started, if the gender is easy to figure out from the players profile or if they speak on the voice channel. Gender or sexual orientation minorities receive more

toxicity unrelated to their skills games due to being perceived as outsiders (ibid.). Women are seen as violating gender norms when they play games that are stereotyped as being for men. According to Cote (2017), research has also shown that gender and sexual harassment are more frequently aimed at those people who are perceived as violating gender norms, as an attempt to “fix” their deviant behavior.

2.1 Gaming

This section will introduce digital gaming, gaming cultures and women in gaming. In the first subsection the focus is on digital gaming and online multiplayer gaming, providing an overview of these concepts at a general level. Second subsection focuses on player identity and masculinity in gaming culture. Third subsection addresses women in gaming, including their struggles and challenges, among other aspects.

2.1.1 Digital Gaming and Online Multiplayer Gaming

Video gaming generally refers to games played on a digital device (de Zoeten & Könecke, 2024). In this thesis, I use the term gaming to refer specifically to community-based, real-time online multiplayer games. The essential aspect is that the game provides players with the opportunity to interact with other players, either through written text, such as text chat, voice communication, such as voice chat, or both simultaneously. Text- and voice chat harassment seems to be most common in first person shooter (FPS) games, and in massively multiplayer online role-playing (MMORPG) games (Holz Ivory et al., 2014).

Digital gaming is a widely engaged leisure activity that many people enjoy. The most common video game genres include role-playing games, strategy games, action and adventure games, sport games, and first-person shooter games (Andrè et al., 2024). According to the 2024 The Finnish Player Barometer study by Kinnunen et al., 64.2% of Finns play some kind of digital games actively, whether it is on computer (PC), console such as PlayStation or Xbox, or games on your mobile devices. The same study states that digital gaming is more common among men. Overall, 82.8% of men play

digital games at least occasionally, and 71.4% play them actively. In comparison, the same numbers among women are 79.2% who play at least occasionally, and 56.3% who play actively. The top three game genres among women are puzzle and card games, simulation games and action games. For men, the top three are shooter games, adventure games and in the third place, puzzle and card games. Men are more active players compared to women in nearly all game genres. Shooter games are particularly popular among men, with men making up 82.2% of active players in that category. Another interesting note was that some of the most clearly online multiplayer games favored by men, such as Call of Duty and Counter-Strike, did not appear at all on the women's list (ibid.). This could be seen supporting the claim that women tend to play wider variety of games than men, and according to the Finnish player Barometer study, prefer games like Hay Day, The Sims and Mario Kart.

Online multiplayer games are an umbrella category, that includes many different types of games, such as action and sports games. Most popular online multiplayer games are genres such as MOBAs, which stands for multiplayer online battle arena, MMORPGs which stands for massively multiplayer online role-playing games, battle royale games and fast-paced FPS games which stands for first-person shooter games (Bowditch et al., 2025). Popular examples of such games are first-person shooters Overwatch 2 and Valorant, MOBAs such as League of Legends, and MMORPGs like World of Warcraft. One of the most popular online multiplayer games is a battle royale game called Fortnite. Most online multiplayer games can be played on both PCs and consoles, and they are also popular on mobile devices. Examples of online multiplayer games available on mobile devices include Fortnite and a mobile version of League of Legends known as Wild Rift. These games often share the common goal of playing together as a team and trying to win. They are almost always equipped with text- and/or voice chat features, which the players can utilize to achieve their goal of enjoying the experience of playing a game, and maybe even winning (Spyridonis et al., 2018).

Gaming culture is a complex and continually evolving phenomenon, shaped by technological advancements and changing cultural practices (Pitroso, 2024). Within this culture exists gaming communities, which are diverse and evolving social formations,

that according to Mäyrä (2015) do not always fit the traditional definition of “community”. In essence, gaming communities are social groups formed around games and the act of playing them. Some studies have even highlighted online gaming spaces as highly positive social environments, particularly for individuals who may feel marginalized or out of place in the offline world (Kowert et al. 2014).

2.1.2 Player identity and masculinity in gaming culture

The gaming culture continues to be perceived as male-dominated environment (Lopez-Fernandez et al., 2019; Morgenroth et al., 2020). The history of gaming is marked by a clear division between games for boys and games for girls, which reinforced a gendered separation in the industry (see e.g. Drenten et al., 2019). This division led to the creation of games specifically for girls, often known as pink games (Fisher & Jenson, 2017), while female players were driven out of gaming due to harassment and feeling of not belonging. When players from other minority groups, such as gender or sexual minority, appear in games, some male players see this as a threat to the “gamer” identity, which drives them to act in a racist or sexist way. They claim to do this to “protect the gaming world” in hope of pushing the unwanted players away from it. (Wells et al., 2024.) In their paper “The Hegemony of Play”, Fron et al., (2007) state that the notion of the “gamer” has created a sub-culture that might reject those who do not identify within the stereotypical traits of a “gamer”. This issue highlights the fact that video games are often created with the stereotypical “gamer” in mind, reinforcing the narrow view of who can be a gamer.

Female players entry into the gaming world often happens through social connections, like relatives and friends (Kivijärvi & Katila, 2022). According to Cote (2020), female players find themselves often occupying some kind of ‘closeted gamer identity’, which limits their visibility and role in the gaming communities. Friman (2022) argues that gaming is culturally and socially constructed identity, that is heavily influenced by broader societal gender norms, where male players are typically positioned as the top of the hierarchy, and female players are often seen as intruders. This leads to a culture where gendered harassment is normalized. Research by Ballard & Welch (2017) showed

that cyberbullying, including different forms of harassment, is more frequently perpetrated by male and heterosexual players, while female and other minority players are targeted. This highlights the dominant masculine norms in gaming spaces. Kovács et al. (2023, p. 68) suggest that women players are particularly drawn to games that allow them to “accumulate treasures, produce individual characters and gather property independently” from the main objectives of the game. Another note by Kovács et al. (2023) was that the female players who adopt masculine traits or behaviors, tend to be more accepted by male-dominated gaming communities. In contrast to this, they state that female players who choose to engage through more feminine, heteronormative behaviors such as flirting, are often subject of hostility and harassment.

A part of player identity is the willingness to use the term “gamer” to describe oneself. The term gamer has gained a negative connotation over time, and a study by Kowert et al. (2023) demonstrated that individuals whose identity was heavily fused with gaming culture were more likely to display certain personality traits, such as narcissism, and also to adopt attitudes and behavioral patterns associated with hostile sexism, racism and white nationalist identity. These are largely the same type of personality traits and attitudes that contribute to the negative image of the “gamer” stereotype as a sexist, racist, aggressive player.

2.1.3 Women in gaming: battling misogyny and stereotypes

According to Morgenroth et al. (2020), increased exposure to female players, may significantly change the stereotypes associated with the term “gamer”. Their study also found that people often think of gamers as men or teenage boys and link traits such as competitiveness and being good with technology to them. On the other hand, their study showed that traits often linked to women and teenage girls, such as being sympathetic, obedient and aware of feelings of others, did not match the typical idea of a gamer. The more people see female players or play with them, might help to change the limited and gendered idea about who is a gamer.

The game industry has been or at least perceived as being male dominated from the beginning, and not by coincidence; first games were largely designed by men for men, since they have been seen as the default target gender (Pan, 2023). Even though women were involved with both developing and playing games from the early days, much of their stories have been forgotten with time (Bjørn & Rosner, 2021) which has given rise to the self-fulfilling prophecy of the video game industry having been dominated by men since the beginning. This male domination still limits the representation and contribution of female voices, but there have been attempts at remedying this and game developers have begun to portray female characters more accurately to appeal to the female audience (Pan, 2023). In 2014, GamerGate (GG) emerged as a backlash against cultural criticism of gaming and it targeted women in the industry with organized harassment and threats. GamerGate began as a harassment campaign targeting primarily game developer Zoë Quinn. Her ex-boyfriends slanderous blog posts about her spread through different online forums, such as 4chan (Mortensen, 2018). The harassment was not limited to Quinn, but several other active females in gaming were targeted. According to Wells et al. (2024), the GamerGate movement claimed to be fighting for ethics in video game journalism, but it was merely a cover to justify misogynist online abuse, largely involving far-right extremists. Supporters of the GamerGate viewed criticism against the way they treated women in the gaming communities as a threat to their traditional, male-dominated gaming culture. This kind of systematic harassment that occurred with GamerGate, may have also impacted how female players are treated this day. (Friman & Ruotsalainen, 2022.)

Gender stereotypes are harmful and discriminatory characteristic in gaming communities. In a 2018 article by Ellemers, it is said that gender stereotypes simplify and exaggerate the differences between male and female, which then again reinforces societal boundaries and justifies gender-based role differentiation and inequality. Shira Chess's "Ready player two" from 2017 discusses how female players have been categorized into their own distinct group, as casual female players, contrasted with hardcore male players. The belief of female players not being good, regardless of their actual skills, is a gender stereotype (Choe et al., 2020), which reinforces the

categorization of female players. In their narrative literature review about female gaming, Lopez-Fernandez et al. (2019), mentioned that when female players spend as much time playing as male players do, they tend to reach the same level of success in the game, thereby contradicting the claim that female players are less skillful at gaming.

In their 2020 article McCullough et al. stated that in video games, female characters were “significantly more likely to be characterized as helpless or innocent, less likely to be portrayed as powerful, and had lesser abilities than male characters” and that women were found to be more likely in minor role, such as helper, than men. In that same article they also found out that more regular video game play is associated with increased negative beliefs about women and also more prejudicial attitudes toward women among female gamers. In a book chapter written by (Drenten et al., 2019), they wrote that gender stereotypes in video games are mostly that “men are dominant aggressors and women are submissive objects in the pursuit of masculinity” (p. 31).

There are many stereotypes about female players, one of the most common being that women only play video games to get attention from men (see e.g. Maclean, 2016; Deng, 2024). This stereotype suggest that women are not genuine gamers and thus are just pretending to be interested in video games to fit in or to attract male players. Moreover, female players are sometimes seen as impostors or even “fake” gamers by the gaming community. This is due to the fact that video games are seen as a highly masculine activity, something that mostly men enjoy doing (Deng, 2024). Studies, like one done by Kuznekoff & Rose (2013), point out that these kinds of stereotypes can contribute to the challenges women face in the gaming communities, making it harder for them to be accepted as genuine participants in the gaming communities. The term “gamer girl” itself is negative in a way, that it suggests that a female that plays video games does not fit into the frames of a “gamer” but needs the prefix “girl” in front of it. Actually, female players must constantly prove themselves in order to earn their status as gamers and not just “girl gamers”. (ibid.) In their (2017) article, Harrison et al. discuss how women are not included in the traditional “gamer” identity; men are not called “gamer guys” as they are seen as the default gender and the traditional perception or definition of a “gamer girl” is very narrow and even tends to sexualize women. According to the article (2017,

p. 50) “women are positioned as the weaker gender, not because they are, but because cultural forces have constructed this perception to be the accepted truth”. As stated by Kuznekoff and Rose (2013), this seems to hold true in the case of female players as well. They conducted a study in which they participated in a violent online multiplayer video game and interacted there with using prerecorded male and female voices. The goal of the study was to determine if the gender of the voice affected the way it was interacted with and why. They found out that the female voice received three times more negative comments compared to the male voice.

Yao et al. (2010) note that the portrayal of women as sexualized objects may influence male players to view women in similarly objectifying manner, reflecting how toxicity in gaming culture mirror broader societal structure. This does not only affect the way female players are perceived in gaming communities but also contributes to the broader culture of harassment. The need for change in the gaming communities is urgent. As Stang (2022) emphasizes, creating safe environments for female players extends beyond just ensuring their willingness to keep on playing games; it also affects women scholars and critics. It is also important to note that this thesis approaches the topic from a western perspective, and thus may not capture global nuances, thereby possibly further reinforcing other negative gender stereotypes.

2.2 Harassment

This section focuses on harassment in online video games, exploring the phenomenon from multiple angles to provide a comprehensive understanding of its forms and impacts. The first subsection examines the various forms that harassment can take within gaming environments. The second subsection discusses the specific impact of harassment on female players. Finally, the third subsection explores known strategies and mechanisms used by players to protect themselves against harassment.

2.2.1 Forms of Harassment

In this thesis, the term ‘harassment’ in the context of online games is understood as toxic behavior that involves offensive words, verbal harassment, derogatory behaviors, unacceptable titles, spamming and failure to communicate (Ekiciler et al., 2022). The term ‘sexual harassment’ is understood to mean situations where someone makes unwanted sexual advances towards another person or behaves in a way that targets someone because of their gender. This includes making inappropriate comments, acting in a sexual or disrespectful way, or pressuring someone to do something sexual (ibid.).

Harassment, according to (Lenhart et al., 2016) involves for example experiencing online abuse such as name-calling, threats, sexual harassment, impersonation and rumor-spreading. The authors also note that defining harassment is difficult, as it is a complex and constantly evolving set of behaviors. According to Marwik and Caplan (2018), harassment directed at women is often centered around their gender, typically taking the form of sexist remarks and threats of sexual violence.

Toxicity commonly refers to unfriendly behavior that “deliberately disrupts the gaming experiences of others” (Liu & Agur, 2023, p. 604). Liu and Agur (ibid.) note that one key characteristic to toxicity is that it is deliberate. That means that intentionally disrupting the game, for example playing intentionally poorly, is a sign of being toxic. This type of behavior, where a player intentionally hinders others progress and ruin their enjoyment, is referred to as griefing (Achterbosch et al., 2024). Trolling in gaming refers to irritating other players with aggressive or distracting behavior or communication, and that way interrupting their gaming experience (Kordyaka & Kruse, 2021).

Online gaming provides a “safe” environment for someone to vent their frustration onto other players. In traditional settings, like board games or team sports, players are much less likely to start using hateful or offensive language directly to others’ faces. Online gaming, however, is a completely different world: players do not fully represent themselves, as they do in real life, but rather a selected, and often very limited, version of their identity. As a result, the risk of getting a reputation for being someone who loses their temper is much lower than it would be in real-life gaming situations. For instance,

Suler (2004) introduced the concept of “online disinhibition effect”, which explains how anonymity and invisibility in online environments can lead to individuals expressing themselves more openly (benign disinhibition) or aggressively (toxic disinhibition) than they would in real world. Toxic disinhibition refers to negative behavior, such as use of hostile language (ibid.). In gaming cultures, toxicity has somewhat become a “norm” and seems to even be widely accepted. The anonymity of gaming cultures seems to be number one factor on why gamers are toxic; studies have shown that removing anonymity from social media platforms leads to decrease in misbehavior (Kowert, 2020). The same study also highlights how SIDE model (Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects), which says that the more anonymous a person is, the more deindividuated they are; this basically means that if you are in some sort of a group, you are highly likely to act as other group members do.

Sexism can be understood as “behavior, conditions, or attitudes that foster stereotypes of social roles based on sex” (Dahl 2015, p.54). Study by Choe et al. (2019) suggests that repeated exposure to sexism while playing online multiplayer video games can shape players’ perceptions and attitudes, contributing to gender discrimination within gaming communities. They also pointed out that encountering sexist content in games is linked to the development or reinforcement of sexist attitudes in real life, which shows that gaming experiences can have a broader influence on players’ lives.

2.2.2 Methods to Protect Against Harassment

Many female players have developed different coping mechanisms to protect themselves from harassment in video games. This thesis aims to explore these coping mechanisms in more depth, but here are listed few of the most commonly reported ones used by female players.

McLean and Griffiths (2019) discussed coping mechanisms such as playing alone, hiding one’s gender identity, or even stopping communication entirely. They found the most common ways women protect themselves from possible harassment in online multiplayer games are hiding one’s gender and not using voice chat; both of which are connected to each other as avoiding voice chat is often done to prevent other players

from recognizing the player as female. Hiding one's gender involves several tactics: the most common ones were making sure public profiles did not mention gender, not using player names that are perceived as "girly" and not using avatars or profile pictures that are pink/other feminine color. Some gaming companies have enabled the use of various protection mechanisms to prevent harassment stemming from different causes. For example, Blizzard's Overwatch 2 introduced a "streamer mode" that allows players' names to change after every match, selecting from predetermined set of neutral names shared by everyone using the mode (Richardson, 2023).

The minority status in the gaming community, among issues with harassment, has led female players to forming their own safe spaces or to seek for them. These can be for example women-only groups on platforms like Facebook, where they can attend in conversations about gaming without the fear of being discriminated or harassed.

Female players can face significant emotional distress due to the harassment they encounter while gaming in multiplayer video games. This kind of harassment, which can include verbal abuse such as sexist comments and insults, can have a serious impact on their well-being. The constant exposure to such negativity can contribute to mental health problems like anxiety and depression. Developing coping mechanisms that can reduce harassment would allow women to continue enjoying their favorite games without as much stress or negativity. There are several reasons that can limit the effectiveness of certain coping mechanisms, such as emotional exhaustion from constant self-defense and reduced gaming enjoyment due to avoidance strategies, which can then make it harder for women players to fully engage in the gaming experience (see McLean & Griffiths, 2019). However, constantly having to defend oneself and change behavior just to be able to play in an environment where you do not feel welcome can be very tiring. Especially when it feels like it not necessary for other, such as male players, who may not face the same challenges. This can lead to some female players to quit online gaming, which isolates them even further from an activity they enjoy. (Tang & Fox, 2016.) In a 2016 study by Carina Assuncao, it was found that female players would often choose to hide their gender identity when playing online games. They did this due to fear of facing toxic or otherwise harmful behavior from other players. The study showed

that some male players would use woman's gender as a reason to insult them during games. This kind of behavior can make the female players feel uncomfortable and unsafe, which can lead to one concealing their identity. This study also highlighted the fact, that some female players might limit their participation in online games, because of these kinds of negative experiences.

3 METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the research methodology used to investigate the coping mechanisms female players use in online multiplayer video games to avoid being harassed. It aims to provide a detailed review of the methods used for data collection and later for analyzing it. The first section introduces the theoretical framework of this thesis. The second section provides background on what kind of participants were searched for and why. The third and fourth sections describe how the research data was collected and from which sources. The fifth section discusses ethical considerations of conducting the study. The sixth section outlines the method of data analysis, more specifically thematic analysis. Finally, the last section presents the narrative literature review that was incorporated to complement the empirical data in case it remained limited.

The aim of this thesis was to investigate whether female players utilize coping mechanisms while playing online multiplayer games to try avoiding harassment, and to specify the coping mechanisms they employ to counter toxicity. This study employed an analytical approach that combined reflexive thematic analysis with a literature review, drawing on existing scholarly literature related to the topic.

3.1 Theoretical Framework: Feminist theory

This thesis's theoretical framework is based on feminist theory, which in this context examines power structures, gender norms and ways in which women's experiences and voices are generally presented and whether or not they are valued. Feminist theory emphasizes viewing the world through a woman's perspective, recognizing the systemic inequalities women face. A feminist lens critically examines the historical and current status of women through equality in social, political and economic matters. (Bierema & Cseh, 2003.) Since the topic of the thesis revolves around the hate targeted to one gender, feminist theory was chosen to shed light on issues of gender equality between men and women. According to Bergstrom (2019), feminist game scholars have consistently highlighted how girls' and women's gameplay experiences are often shaped by outside

pressures and rarely happens completely on their own terms. She also argues that feminist game studies critically examine how gender and other intersecting identities are represented and experienced in gaming, highlighting the exclusionary norms that have traditionally marginalized women. This perspective offers a deeper understanding of who is included in gaming spaces, according to dominant norms, and who is left out. Notably, many scholars in feminist game studies also identify as active players or power users of video games themselves, which further enriches their insight and critiques (Losh, 2015). Bergstrom (2019) also argues that the underrepresentation of girls and women in gaming should not be dismissed as a result of personal preference, of them not wanting to be part of it, but more in a context of industry-driven stereotypes about who games are made for.

Due to my own experiences on the thesis topic, I wanted to take an openly feministic point of view on how those perceived as not ideal participants, in this case women, are seen as something that does not belong in gaming environments and thus face more harassment in its different forms.

3.2 Participants

The aim was to look into the ways female players protect themselves from possible harassment and toxicity and thus the study was targeted at female players who play online multiplayer video games. Other criteria, such as specific age, hometown, or similar background information, were not included since that kind of information was not needed in order for the research to be credible since these factors would not affect the results because the interest of the study was behavior online. The focus was solely placed on female players, since even though it is to be acknowledged that harassment is a big problem across all genders and sexualities, targeted harassment toward female players is a big problem still.

The goal was to reach adult participants who identify as women and who are active players, ideally spending a significant amount of their time playing online multiplayer games. This way, it was more likely that they may have faced different kinds of

harassment in online multiplayer environments. The survey was primarily shared on platforms where online multiplayer gaming was one of the central topics. The survey was created in English, to ensure international accessibility and the opportunity to reach a diverse group of respondents from different countries and backgrounds. It was shared on different Discord channels and Facebook groups: the Facebooks groups called Geek Women Unite! (Finland), We In Games Finland, GAMER GIRL WARRIOR'S and Discord channels called Female Gaming Finland, Game Studies, Suomalainen Fandom and Piiri. The link to the survey was also shared with a few personal contacts. The survey successfully reached 18 participants, who were willing to share their personal experiences and emotions regarding the issue of harassment in online video gaming.

The survey received fewer responses than initially expected, and it should be acknowledged that a larger amount of data would have allowed for a deeper and more comprehensive analysis. Considering the resources and scope of this thesis, the research was successfully completed within given limitations.

3.3 Research Method and Data Collection

To gather the data, a mixed method online survey was chosen to be used as a research method, since it combines both quantitative (numerical), and qualitative (textual) data. Online surveys are structured questionnaires that collect textual information from participants who reply to a survey form on the Internet (Vehovar et al., 2017). There are three types of surveys: quantitative, qualitative and, one that combines them both, called mixed methods (Bryman, 2006). Quantitative surveys focus on collecting numerical data and often consist of closed-ended questions such as multiple choice, and the data collected from the replies is then analyzed statistically. Qualitative surveys, on the other hand, focus on gathering non-numerical, text-based data, utilizing open-ended questions to receive descriptive and detailed answers from the respondents. When combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, the likelihood of making valuable and even surprising outcomes increases. (ibid.) That is then called mixed methods survey, which combines both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Mixed methods survey was chosen to be used in this thesis in hope of shining a light on the topic from a few different

points of view. Following the mixed method online survey, a narrative literature review was conducted to provide an overview of existing theories and conclusions on the topic. A mixed methods online survey was conducted to gather data from female players. Online surveys are a great way to gather information about participants own experiences, in their own words. Compared to interviews, online surveys offer a high level of anonymity and privacy, which can be beneficial when collecting responses on highly sensitive topics, which harassment, especially sexual harassment, can be seen as. If one were to identify cons of surveys compared to interviews, it would be the inability to ask any follow-up questions for clarification. Another potential issue arises if a respondent misunderstands a question, as there is no opportunity to immediately correct them, which can then lead to unresponsive answers to the questions (Toepoel, 2016).

Another limitation of online surveys can be self-selection bias (Bethlehem, 2010). In his 2010 article Bethlehem argues that online surveys can be unreliable due to two factors: under-coverage and self-selection. This can then lead to biased estimates and then wrong conclusions can be made from the collected data. Under-coverage is when the survey is not reaching enough of the target audience for the study, for example possible target audience members who do not have Internet access are left out. Self-selection then again means that the survey respondents who just happen to decide to answer the survey are the ones where the survey data comes from, and the researcher has no say in who can actually take part on the study. (Ibid.). Under-coverage is not that great of a factor in this study, since the participants are gathered through a hobby that is online video games, which also requires internet access. But self-selection can be seen as a limitation factor in this study and must be kept in mind.

The topic of harassment in its various forms can be a sensitive subject for some, and that was one of the main reasons I wanted to do this study by an anonymous online survey rather than interviews. Anonymity can be a significant factor for many, and not only the anonymity that online surveys offer but also the possibility to participate in the study completely online can be a big factor for some, in making the decision if they want to attend or not. A broad enough participant base ensures more reliable results; it is important to get a sufficient number of participants. It is also important to keep in mind

that because the online survey will be shared to multiple different online platforms, there is a possibility to receive malicious or unserious responses. While this may not be highly likely, it is still a possibility and must be acknowledged when manually going through the responses.

The survey consisted of both open-ended and closed-ended questions, which enabled as large and divergent sample as possible. The survey questions were as follows:

1. Age?
 - a. 18-25
 - b. 25-30
 - c. 30-40
 - d. 40 and up

2. Have you encountered harassment while playing online multiplayer video games?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

3. If you have encountered harassment while playing online multiplayer games, what kind? (Open-ended)

4. How often do you utilize the in-game privacy settings (e.g., blocking players, using streamer mode) to protect yourself from harassment?
 - a. Always
 - b. Very often
 - c. Sometimes
 - d. Never

5. How often are you the target of harassment from other players?
 - a. Very often
 - b. Half of the time
 - c. Very rarely
 - d. Never
6. Have you come up with any coping mechanisms to protect yourself from harassment? (Open-ended)
7. Does harassment affect your gaming habits in any way? (Open-ended)
8. Are there ways to prevent the harassment women face in online multiplayer games? (Open-ended)

The online survey was made using Microsoft Forms, and it was open for five weeks during the period from 10.2.2025 to 23.3.2025. The number of collected replies was 18. The link to the survey was shared on multiple different online platforms. The survey consisted of three multiple-choice questions and four open-ended questions. After five weeks of gathering replies, the survey reached 18 replies.

The survey questions had to be carefully and thoughtfully worded, as the goal was to collect as unambiguous data as possible and to allow respondents to reflect their own experiences with the topic, rather than just framing the questions in a way that assumes that all women experience harassment; thus, the importance of carefully designing the survey questions is paramount. As mentioned, the desire was to collect as open and honest data as possible, in a way that the participants could engage in self-reflection and really think about their own experiences with this topic instead of something they have heard has happened to someone else. The aim was also to try to shape the questions and information text in a way where I do not state directly that all female players receive harassment while playing online video games, since that might not be the case; it is impossible to prove that all female players have to deal with harassment, and I also

strongly believe that there are female players who never have to have experienced it. It is a whole different case then, if they have always unconsciously used coping mechanisms such as not using voice chat and hiding ones gender.

3.4 Ethics

For the survey participants, the initial landing page of the survey required the participant to accept the terms and consent statement of the survey before continuing to answer. On top of that, a privacy notice was also created. The data collected from the survey was stored on the personal computer of the thesis author, until the thesis was completed and officially approved, and after that, all the data collected was destroyed. Access to the data was limited to the thesis author and, if necessary, the people supervising the make of this thesis. Since there was no need to gather any personal information during the survey, there is very minimal risk for people to identifying the respondents. All that was needed to know was that the participant is/identifies as female. There is also a need to understand that even though the hypothesis is that female players face harassment due to their gender while playing online multiplayer games, that might not be the case with everyone. Cultural norms and values from player's personal background influence how they perceive potential harassment; some may not view the same behaviors as equally negative, as past experiences and personal history can significantly shape one's interpretation. As a female player who has her own thoughts on this topic, I have to acknowledge the preconceptions I might hold and how they might influence the interpretation of the data. It should be kept in mind that I, as a female who has been playing online multiplayer video games for as long as I can remember, have a long history of getting harassed while playing and have also my own experiences on how the harassment has affected my will to keep on playing. I see my own experiences on this topic as an advantage because it helps me understand the participants experiences on a deeper level, in a way that someone who has not experienced this kind of harassment would not necessarily understand.

3.5 Data analysis

Since the goal was to describe the experiences of female players, thematic analysis was best suited for this purpose, as it seeks to identify and understand common or shared meanings. The data collected from the survey was first transferred into an Excel document, and then into a Word Document, to make it easier to organize and analyze. I applied reflexive thematic analysis to interpret the data, keeping in mind that the authors of “Thematic Analysis” (Braun & Clarke, 2021) emphasized the importance of being a thoughtful practitioner and understanding one’s role as an active participant in the analysis.

The analysis process began by getting thoroughly familiar with the data that was collected from the survey responses. As I transferred the responses into a Word document, I conducted an initial reading of the data, which allowed me to gain a comprehensive and clear overview of the content. This corresponded to the first phase of thematic analysis: familiarization with the data, in which engaging with the material allows the researcher to start noticing patterns and potential themes. Following this, I moved to the second phase of thematic analysis: generating initial codes. In this stage, I systematically coded the parts of the data that appeared relevant or meaningful. These codes were organized into a separate document. This led to the third phase: searching for themes. Here, I began to group codes together based on shared meanings and similarities. In thematic analysis, themes are built from codes, that share a core essence or meaning. The themes in thematic analysis do not just arise on their own but instead are a product of the researchers' thought process and engagement with the data. Followed by this began the fourth phase: reviewing themes. During this, I revisited the preliminary themes repeatedly, ensuring that the found themes accurately represented the coded material accurately and reflected recurring patterns across the dataset. After that, it was time to move on to the fifth phase: define and name the themes. The sixth and final phase consisted of producing the report of what I have gathered, by weaving together analytic narrative and selecting appropriate data extracts to illustrate each theme. Since thematic analysis puts emphasis on the researchers own thinking, it can lead to the responses from the survey being coded and then analyzed in a way that suits the researchers own

worldview. This means that another researcher could possibly come up with different results from the same dataset. (Braun & Clarke, 2021.)

Complete objectivity is rarely possible in qualitative research, especially in reflexive approaches, which is why transparency about the researchers position becomes an essential aspect of the analytic process. Reflexive thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021, p. 12), provides valuable tools for reflection. It encourages the researcher not to be only aware of their own worldview and biases, but also to critically examine how their own values and experiences may shape the way they engage with the data. In a way, reflexive thematic analysis offers an opportunity to explore one's own prejudices and to compare them with the emerging findings from the data. For this reason, rather than trying to eliminate subjectivity entirely, reflexive thematic analysis embraces it, as an inevitable part of the research process; by recognizing and examining one's own influence on the analysis, the researcher is better equipped to produce a nuanced and accurate interpretation of the data. This also means, that different researchers might interpret the same data differently, depending on their personal perspectives, which reinforces the importance of reflexivity and transparency throughout the study.

3.6 Narrative literature review

Due to the limited number of willing respondents to the online survey, I incorporated a narrative review of prior studies into the analysis to supplement own empirical data. Conducting a narrative literature review alongside thematic analysis, I aim to draw connections between the responses identified from the data and existing research through a literature review. The plan is to try to find the same themes that I found from the survey responses, in earlier studies and then write about them in a way that they combine into a single theme.

According to Salminen (2011), narrative literature review allows researcher to create a broad overview of the subject, kind of arranging a "landscape of events" (p. 7). A narrative literature review aims to achieve interpretive understanding and broad

contextualization of a specific topic area, by summarizing prior studies (Ferrari, 2015). The researcher must be able to construct the theoretical framework of the study through informed interpretation and evidence-based conclusions. According to Cook et al. (1997), narrative reviews are useful when trying to form a broad perspective on a certain topic.

4 FINDINGS

This chapter presents a comprehensive analysis of the data collected through the online surveys that I conducted and also reflects these findings in relation to existing literature on the subject. By comparing and contrasting the themes from the survey responses with insights drawn from previous studies, this chapter aims to build a nuanced understanding of the topic of this thesis. With the collected data, and the use of earlier research on the same topic, I will be answering my research questions:

1. Does harassment affect female players gaming habits?
2. Have female players come up with coping mechanisms trying to avoid and counter harassment?

4.1 Findings

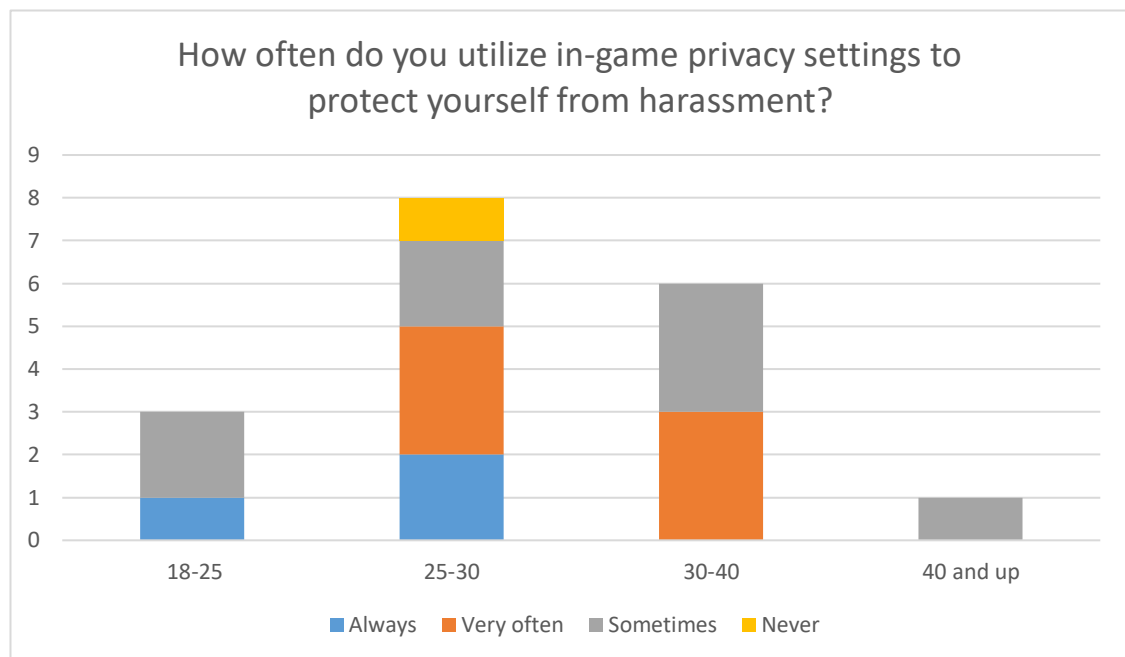
Based on the overall results, 16 out of 18 reported having encountered harassment while playing online multiplayer games. The two participants who indicated that they had not experienced harassment also stated that they do not play online multiplayer games, suggesting a clear correlation between participation in these gaming environments and receiving harassment. The age distribution of the respondents was as follows:

Table 1. *Age distribution of respondents.*

Age group	Number of respondents
18-25	3
25-30	8
30-40	6
40 and up	1

When asked about their use of in-game privacy settings, such as blocking other players or enabling streamer mode, only one respondent reported never using these tools to protect themselves. Eight stated that they use such settings sometimes, six reported using them very often and three said they always rely on them as protection from possible harassment. In terms of the frequency of harassment, only one respondent claimed to have never been the target of harassment. Ten reported experiencing harassment very rarely, five said it occurred about half of the time and two noted that they encountered harassment very often. Given that the only respondents who claimed not to have faced harassment also reported not playing online multiplayer games, it can be concluded that all respondents who actively participate in online multiplayer gaming environments are subjected to some form of harassment, at least occasionally.

Figure 1. *Distribution of replies on utilizing in-game privacy settings*



The chart above shows the distribution of survey respondent in terms of their use of potential coping mechanisms. It can be noted that the use of these mechanisms was most common among respondents aged 18 to 30, with three of them reporting that they “always” use such mechanisms.

4.2 Themes

In this section of the thesis, I will be discussing the general themes that were found from the collected data. The responses provided valuable insights, and a thematic analysis was conducted to analyze these survey responses in detail. A wide range of experiences and perspectives were shared by the respondents, and several topics seemed essentially connected to the collected data. These central topics were negative gender emphasis, misogyny and sexual harassment, coping mechanisms, the impact of harassment on gaming habits, and the importance of having a supportive group or circle of friends to play with. Among the topics that I identified, misogyny and sexual harassment are separate from different forms of negativity or harassment. Direct references are coded by using, for example R1, where “R” stands for “respondent” and the number indicates which specific response it refers to. This helps to differentiate respondents and allows direct citations of their responses.

Based on the central topics named in the previous paragraph, the following themes were created from the most central and significant responses:

1. Outdated stereotypes portray women as less capable or serious players
2. Women players hide their gender and build communities to cope

Theme one focuses on different ways in which gender plays a role in gaming environments, harassment players receive and its impact on them. Theme two, in turn, explores the mechanisms that players adopt in an effort to avoid harassment. This theme also attempts to see the positive, emphasizing the value of having social connections and the role of having trusted friends that help to create a safe and enjoyable gaming experience. Furthermore, it attempts to shed light on a broader picture of how harassment in online gaming environments could potentially be reduced.

4.2.1 Outdated stereotypes portray women as less capable or serious players

The respondents reported encountering negative interactions from other players while engaging in online multiplayer video games. The responses primarily centered around being called names, verbal insults, bullying, getting blamed for losses. This theme specifically addresses the negative experiences reported by study participants, that may be related to their gender. I have noticed that while anyone can experience harassment in a highly toxic environment such as online multiplayer video games tend to be, female players are more likely to face harassment and negative attention, not because of poor performance in the game, but because their gender can be assumed from their gamer tag or other identifiers, making them targets for other players. This theme is not entirely about respondents clearly having negative experiences with other players commenting on their gender in a negative way, but more so about respondents perceiving the situation as negative because their gender was brought up by other players as a factor.

“Concluding that my performance in game is linked to my gender, constantly asking me to talk because a teammate being a woman is so exiting” (R1)

“Mostly different types of shit talking, for example getting told I'm trash or sometimes throwing insults throughout the whole match” (R9)

Many of the respondents indicated that their gender was often the reason they were being harassed, or that their gender was highlighted as though it were unusual for women to play video games. For some reason, female players are rarely seen as just “gamers” or normal players as others but instead are always labelled as “girl gamers” which perpetuates a harmful stigma (Drenten et al., 2023). Respondents expressed feeling like outsiders, noting that female players are often treated as a separate group by certain players, rather than being recognized as equal participants in the gaming community.

“Younger age back in 2011 when I got my Skyrim, one of my classmates said, "I didn't knew(sic) girls play Skyrim" - that wasn't clear insult but tells a lot” (R4)

“Lots of comments about ‘go to kitchen’, ‘women should not play games’”
(R14)

Many respondents reported experiencing blame and criticism directed at their gaming performance purely because of their gender. A recurrent theme in their responses was being labelled as “bad players”, not because of their actual skill level but because they are female. This kind of gender-based judgement led to them being excluded or ignored during gameplay, which reinforced their feelings of isolation. Several respondents mentioned being held responsible for their teams’ losses, regardless of their actual contribution to the game. This reflects the stigma surrounding female players, where outdated stereotypes portray women as less capable or serious players, which then makes it easy for others to put the blame on them when losing a game (see Fox & Tang, 2014; Austin, 2022).

“I rarely join the voice chat because I feel like when people hear that I’m a girl gamer, if the game is not going well they’d start blaming me as I usually play support” (R12)

“In shooting games with voice chat on, there have been some verbal insults like "bitch" and "you cannot play this game because you are woman".” (R4)

Based on the responses gathered from the survey, many players acknowledged that voice chat is often a crucial component of effective communication and successful teamplay. They recognized that the ability to quickly share information can significantly enhance teams’ overall performance and chances to win the game. However, despite the understanding of the benefits of using voice chat, almost all of the respondents chose to avoid it. The decision behind that was largely driven by the fear of having to face harassment or any kind of toxicity – most of the times something related to their gender.

There was a mention about how derogatory talk is unfortunately part of any kind of sports, no matter the gender. So, this responder highlighted that it is the online multiplayer games nature that brings the toxicity and harassment with it and that everyone can be target of harassment while playing online multiplayer video games. In

her 2017 article, Amanda Cote stated that online communities have even defended their right to “trash talk”, saying it to be a part of gaming.

“...It is unfortunately part of any sports culture to shit talk, no matter your gender, and if you experience harassment, act on it...” (R13)

Even though harassment or derogatory talk can be seen as a part of any kind of sport, in such situations we must not to only accept something to be unfortunate aspect of the culture, but to act on it, to make a change. I would claim that while gendered hatred toward women in online multiplayer games is often dismissed as just part of the “typical” provoking and joking around that comes with gaming culture, it is not. Rather, it is misogyny, targeted specifically because the player’s gender does not align with what some perceive as the norm. Casual joking and even toxicity in a form of saying for example “team diff”, which means that the other team was bad, or pointing out how many times someone has already died in the game, can be seen as this kind of derogatory talk that is, according to some, part of any competitive sports culture. It is important to note that when the insults get personal or target one’s gender, I would argue that they are no longer merely about joking around or engaging in derogatory talk for the sake of sports but have become personal attacks directed at a specific group of people.

Many of the respondents reported regularly facing misogynistic remarks and sexual harassment while playing online multiplayer video games. Many of them mentioned that these negative encounters often stemmed directly from their gender, by being clear that they were not bullied or harassed because of their skill or behavior, but simply because they were female players in a predominantly male space. The comments respondents mentioned receiving were frequently sexist, including stereotypical and degrading phrases such as “go back to the kitchen”, which implies that their place was in a domestic setting rather than in the gaming environment. Some of the respondents were told to stick to playing “easy support characters”, reinforcing the harmful stereotype that female players lack the skill and ability to play any other role than support. These kinds of situations create a hostile and unwelcoming atmosphere that might discourage female

players participation. When asked about what kind of harassment they have encountered, the following responses represent best the overall picture:

“Told to go back to the kitchen, to keep playing the easy support characters, sexist language overall, asking to get my contact information” (R7)

“General insults, sexism, inappropriate wording” (R15)

“Sexual, being singeled(sic) out, blamed and mobbed, left out” (R8)

The respondents frequently connected the harassment they received to the fact that other players were able to identify their gender. This, finding out one’s gender, often occurred through subtle cues, such as their gamer tag, which might have included a feminine name or reference, or more unintended cues such as the use of, in a way, gendered icons, often colored pink. Once their gender was revealed, they became significantly more vulnerable to harassment and toxicity, including sexist and inappropriate comments. This connection between gender visibility and threat of harassment led to many respondents feel like they have to carefully monitor how they presented themselves in-game, through gamer tags and icons.

“My gamer tag also indicates that I’m a girl so if someone has attacked me usually it’s something like calling me a whore, or other similar names.” (R12)

Any visible indication of femininity, whether it was a gamer tag, a voice or even player icon, often served as a trigger for harassment. As a result, many players actively avoided using elements that could be interpreted as “girly”, aiming to make their in-game identity as neutral as possible to not attract any negative attention.

“In World of tanks one player knew I was woman, he started to push me with his tank in corner and places where I cannot move.” (R4)

In the direct quotation above from a survey response, the participant describes her ability to play was deliberately restricted by another player solely because she was known to be a woman. From my own experience, this behavior is surprisingly common as I have also run into players who would completely refuse to play the game after finding out

there was a woman in their team and thus restricted our team's ability to win. I have also noticed that while anyone can experience harassment in a highly toxic environment such as online multiplayer video games tend to be, female players are more likely to face harassment and negative attention, not because of poor performance in the game, but because their gender can be assumed from their gamer tag or other identifiers, making them targets for other players.

4.2.2 Women players hide their gender and build communities to cope

Online multiplayer video games are still to this day seen as male-dominated environments, where female players are in male player's territory. Previous studies (McLean & Griffiths, 2019; Fox & Tang, 2017) have shown that female players report on using different kinds of coping mechanisms in order to avoid harassment.

4.2.2.1. Coping mechanisms

When asked about using coping mechanisms to protect themselves from harassment, almost all of the respondents of this thesis' study mentioned not using in-game chats, most of them not using voice chat, but some of them answered not using in-game chats at all which means not using text chat either. Since the female voice seems to be triggering to the players who are toxic, most of the survey respondents replied on not using voice chat at all, and one even mentioned using voice changer in order to be able to use voice chat in games. Another popular reply to this was not letting other players know your gender, which then again circles back to how some players might be irritated simply by the existence of women. On the other hand, the female players who play, may not do it in a visible way, which does more harm than good regarding the persisting gendered stigma surrounding gaming. Where not using voice chat may help female players with not having to deal with harassment, it at the same time affects the gaming environment in a way that female players who are known to be there, are not heard and visible, which would be important when trying to reach equal gaming environments.

Another frequently mentioned coping mechanism was playing in a safe environment and with your friends. Respondents reported feeling secure while playing with people they

knew, as they did not have to worry about their mistakes being attributed to their gender. Many participants mentioned primarily playing with their friends or within communities in which all players are female. One of the main topics recognized from the responses was the need to have a safe place; a group or community where a female player does not have to fear of receiving hate when interacting with other players. Survey respondents mostly mentioned having their own group of friends who they play with, and according to (McLean & Griffiths, 2019) female focused gaming communities that feel safe, are important to many.

“I would say finding a group of friends to play with, like a safe environment who won’t blame you because you’re a girl.” (R12)

One common coping mechanism mentioned by several respondents was the intentional use of neutral or non-feminine in-game gamer tags. Many female players mention making effort to avoid using nicknames or gamer tags that might be perceived as “girly” or suggest their gender in any way, for example own name. This coping mechanism of not using gamer tag that gives away your gender was adopted as a form of self-protection, allowing female players to participate in online multiplayer games without immediately identified as women, which would highly increase your chance of getting harassed. This tactic is supported by Assuncao’s (2016) findings on female players’ propensity to hide their gender. Some of the respondents highlight the need to even select your in-game icon in a way that it does not have overly feminine features and thus give away your gender.

“The time I have spoken or had a “girly” nickname I have been harassed often”
(R5)

Some of the respondents mentioned that one of their key mechanisms for coping with toxicity and avoiding harassment was to avoid engaging directly with the toxic players. They explained that they intentionally chose not to respond to toxic or aggressive comments, because engaging in those situations often only escalated it. By staying silent they hope to reduce the tension of the situation, and that way prevent further conflict. This is driven by the understanding that toxic players seek to provoke a reaction, and by

staying silent, you will not give them the satisfaction. One respondent highlighted the importance of maintaining composure in these moments. They emphasized the importance of responding in a calm and controlled manner, since in the best-case scenario, it could disarm the harasser and if nothing else, it might make victim feel more in control of the situation. Another respondent described using sarcastic and humoristic comebacks as a way to turn the interaction around. This way, through humor, they could deflect the negativity and shift the tone of the interaction, and even gain the upper hand on the situation, by making the toxic player seem foolish or even humiliated in a way.

“For example, if they say ‘Go to the kitchen and make me a sandwich’, my response has been ‘Sure, what kind would you like?’” (R13)

“...get flamed for my gender I flame back, since my gender is the issue I make the harasser’s (always a male) gender the issue. This doesn’t protect me but it protects my self-esteem.” (R1)

Responding to the toxicity in kind, such as snapping back at the harassers, can be interpreted as a form of coping mechanism. It may offer the harassed one a brief sense of empowerment or control by allowing them to get a payback. However, this approach is not risk free and engaging directly with harassers can escalate the situation and potentially lead to prolonged harassment, where the harasser repeatedly targets the same individual over time. In some cases, this harassment can extend beyond the game environment, for example on social media platforms. Previous research has highlighted that answering to harassment in kind can sometimes reinforce the attention of harassers rather than deter them, making the situation more persistent and emotionally taxing for the victim (see e.g. Fox & Tang, 2017).

It can be argued that female players are forced to choose between enduring potential harassment or to develop coping mechanisms to protect themselves. One respondent even mentioned taking it to next level, by sometimes using a voice changer, in order to sound more masculine.

“If I need to speak, I will go out of my way to not do or employ the use of a voice changer to sound more masculine” (R17)

Respondents reported that experiences with toxicity and harassment had affected their gaming habits. Some described relying on familiar coping mechanisms, such as those mentioned earlier, like avoiding voice chat and playing only with trusted and players they know well, in order to not having to deal with toxicity. However, even when utilizing various coping mechanisms, some still felt the need to take breaks or switch to different games when the environment became too hostile. In some cases, the harassment they had encountered appeared to diminish their interest in certain types of games, even those that had once been especially meaningful to them.

“It usually brings down my motivation and makes me hesitant to play more in case I get harrassed again. One time when I came back to a game I got insulted in the first match and I haven't actually played the game since haha” (R9)

The need to rely on various coping mechanisms to avoid harassment has made gaming less enjoyable to some of the respondents. Few participants mentioned feeling the atmosphere of the gaming community as a whole to have gone to worse. That has a negative effect on players desire to play actively. One respondent shared that she felt the gaming community has become less welcoming over time. When she was younger, it seemed easier to fit in and feel accepted by the community, but now, she perceives a shift towards a more unwelcoming environment. Additionally, she mentioned that she struggles to find friends from the game she plays, as there is always the possibility of encountering harassment, which makes it difficult to form friendships in the gaming community.

“I do not like interacting with other players. Not in text chat or voice. Sometimes I do it anyway. I play alone a lot and feel like I can't look for friends to play with in-game since there is always the harassment possibility. When I was a teen it was easier and I felt like the community was friendlier but not anymore” (R1)

“...transferring out toxic online spaces for another space/server without harassment” (R16)

When playing with strangers, respondents generally did not communicate much, but the barrier to use feature such as voice chat lowered when playing in a group that feels familiar and safe. Many female players seek other female players to play with, for example, from gaming communities where all members are women. The assumption is that the players found in these communities are not likely to be toxic towards other women, and that playing with them could be more enjoyable than with strangers who might start to harass and blame the female player for loss.

In response to the question about ways to prevent the harassment that women face in online multiplayer games, some participants suggested that gendered harassment would be less of an issue if women who enjoy video games were more widely normalized. They argued that if female gamers were viewed as a common and accepted part of the gaming community, the negative stereotypes and hostility aimed at them could be cut down or even eliminated.

“I might be a bit pessimistic here but I feel like the harassment towards women in online games won't stop as long as there's this much misogyny in our society in general. Online games have been/are known as "boys' games" and many of the guys playing them seem to feel very strongly that women should get out of "their space". So honestly the best way would probably be to normalize(sic) women playing online games” (R9)

“Make women playing games more normal, because you don't question something that is normal” (R11)

The survey respondents' replies about reducing gendered harassment by normalizing female players are supported by Fox and Tang's (2014) study, in which they stated that sexism and harassment have driven female players to engage in so called “silent play” rather than in “active play”, the latter which could ideally help normalize the presence of female players in online multiplayer gaming spaces.

4.2.2.2. Built-in tools in games

Some online multiplayer games offer in-game features that allow players to mute, avoid or even block other players. According to the responses, this was another widely used and seen as an important coping mechanism among respondents. Many of them shared about regularly using these functions to protect themselves from toxic behavior. When facing harassment, respondents said they often use these in-game tools to mute voice chat and avoiding players who were harassing them, to make sure they would not have to play with them in future games. These in-game features seemed to be important in order to be able to still play online multiplayer games, without having to deal with toxic players.

“At least in OW2 you can avoid people, so if someone is being toxic towards me I’m just going to avoid them as teammate” (R12)

Many of the respondents mentioned the importance of reporting the players who harass other, in order to protect themselves but to also make a change. They mostly agreed that change will not happen unless you make it happen. Reporting toxic players was seen as a good way to let the game makers know that there is harassment happening in their games. Many of the survey responders mentioned “harsher punishments” to help the gaming environments be less toxic towards female players. At the same time, they mentioned that with most of the games, the toxic players do not receive harsh enough punishments, or punishment at all, for harassing others. It was also emphasized that game developers would need to take reports more seriously, since they seem to not be leading to the desired outcome of banned players quitting their toxic behavior. Lastly, the respondents pointed out harsher punishment for the harassers and the need to victims to keep on reporting bad behavior, since there is no other way for the game to recognize it.

“Taking it seriously when reported, banning players that harass others” (R8)

“The best way to get rid of toxic players is to report them” (R13)

“better/harsher punishment for harassment (plus easier access to report), more educational work about appropriate (online) behaviour, general educational work against harassment and misogynistic behaviour” (R15)

This chapter analyzed the findings and described the multiple coping mechanisms female players tend to utilize in order to be able to play online multiplayer games. The next chapter will discuss the findings as a whole and compare them to previous studies.

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In the last chapter I will summarize and reflect on the key findings of this thesis. The chapter will begin with a discussion of the main findings, continuing to examine the limitations of the study and lastly suggest topics and questions for future research.

The overall message from the findings of both this and previous studies seems to be that the gendered nature of harassment has created a feeling of being unsafe among female players, and to protect from that, they feel like they need to hide, minimize or downplay their identity in order to simply enjoy playing an online multiplayer video game without being harassed. This highlights a broader issue within the gaming culture, where femininity is still, in 2025, stigmatized and treated as a weakness or in other ways unwelcome in these gaming environments. As almost half of all gamers worldwide are women (McLean & Griffiths, 2019), it's shocking that they still have the need to try to protect themselves from gender-based toxicity. Based on the narrative literature review and the survey I conducted, it can be stated as a fact that female players need to use coping mechanisms to play and participate in online multiplayer gaming environments.

There were different forms of harassment detailed in the findings section. It seemed to be normal for the respondents to recognize that encountering harassment was most often related to their gender. When their gender became known to other players, in some way, it often led to things like sexual harassment, insults, belittling, and even other players blaming the female player for the loss. Some respondents even mentioned receiving comments about how they did not belong in the gaming community and should go back to stereotypical gender roles; basically, back to the kitchen. Any kind of communication, but especially voice chat, was seen as the most common factor in the occurrence of harassment. Voice chat is recognized to be an important tool in online multiplayer games, in order for you and your team to perform well, but very few of the respondents were willing to do so in risk of becoming target of harassment, and that is why nearly all of them reported not using voice chat when playing with strangers. Also muting text chat completely was mentioned in order to not have to face any negativity from other players. Alongside voice chat, respondents brought up gamer tags, possible profile

pictures and avatars. Most respondents reported consciously hiding any signs of their gender in gaming environments. This meant that their gamer tags (the name visible to other players) and profile picture were kept as neutral as possible; sometimes even leaning towards masculine side, to avoid standing out and therefore facing harassment.

Hiding one's gender was found to be a common way to try avoiding harassment, but some respondents were aware that this only added to the problem overall, as it reduces the visibility of female players. Some female players seem to have a desire and even a certain pride in their gender, and wanted to show it to other players, but the majority seem to conceal their gender for safety reasons. Those who do show their gender, say that they want to make the female players visible for other players. Although there are brave female players who do so, the majority seem to resort to hiding; and I am not blaming them for it. Safe communities and friend groups to play with became one of the most important themes among the respondents. Many shared that they only play with their friends to avoid potential harassment. Some also mentioned the difficulty of finding new friends from games, as the threat of harassment prevents them from even trying. This situation can ultimately lead some players to quit gaming entirely, if they find playing on their own too overwhelming, but cannot find friends to create a safe environment to play in.

The methods found in both present study and previous ones on the topic highlight the emotional burden that many players, and especially minorities, carry simply to guard their mental well-being and possibility to keep on playing the games they love. Anyone can face harassment in online multiplayer video games. The atmosphere can be toxic due to many reasons; the guise of anonymity, and the feeling of possibly not having to deal with consequences of being mean to someone online because most of the time real world repercussions are not imminent. The survey responders also highlighted the fact that even though coping mechanisms, such as not using voice chat and avoiding toxic players, do work most of the time, there is need to solve the problem with gendered harassment in online multiplayer gaming.

While coming up with different coping mechanisms in order to be able to enjoy playing games that you are interested in, is crucial, it should be noted that while these coping mechanisms offer temporary relief, many respondents also noted that they are not a long-term solution. They expressed the belief that something needs to be done in order for the gaming environment to be more equal and welcoming to all. Based on previous research and the responses to the survey for this study, it seems the burden is placed on the victims of harassment to take action and try to find a way to keep on playing in these harmful situations, rather than on the game developers to create safer and more inclusive environments. Some respondents even tied this issue to the gender equality issues that still permeate the society as a whole and expressed that they felt the sexism issue in gaming communities cannot be fixed unless the broader society becomes less misogynistic.

In previous studies about the topic, for example in Fox and Tang (2017) it was stated that harassment affects the way that female players play; they limit in-game communication in fear of being harassed. Anyone with any experience with online multiplayer video games knows that communication is a major part in these kinds of team-based games if you desire to win. Other coping mechanisms Fox and Tang (ibid.) identified were hiding gender, tolerating or denying harassment, seeking help or reporting harassment, and self-blame. In my study the self-blame coping mechanism was not present. Cote (2017) identified many similar coping mechanisms, such as leaving online gaming, avoiding strangers, hiding one's gender and assuming more aggressive personalities. One method of protecting themselves from harassment that arose from the present study was to maintain one's pride and refrain from sinking to the harasser's level, which in turn helped the targeted player feel more in control of the situation. This can be done by answering to the harasser in a way, that you would turn the whole encounter upside down, for example by using sarcasm or humor. This would help with the situation not feeling so negative and maybe being able to gain the upper hand. While this method does not simply solve the issue of toxicity, it can empower and strengthen players who could otherwise feel unsafe in these kinds of environments.

In Cote's study (2017), one of the other coping mechanisms identified were emphasizing skill and the use of flirting as a way of winning over male players. The latter can be seen as contributing to the gendered divide that already exists, and it could even be argued to be tied to the so-called Queen Bee phenomenon. The Queen Bee phenomenon refers to the instances where women put other women down, for example in gaming spaces to gain acceptance from men (Tang et al., 2020; Derks et al., 2011).

Identifying and reporting any type of toxic behavior in online gaming is a way of preventing harassment and possibly even helping gender diversity and equality grow in the online gaming communities (Ekiciler et al., 2022). Another study, published in 2017 by Harrison, Drenten and Pendarvis, explored the challenges women face in the male dominated gaming culture. The study was conducted by an in-depth interview with eight women participants, aged between 20 to 29, all of whom were active players. In the interviews they investigated the participants' experiences in gaming, focusing on harassment, stereotyping and coping in masculine-oriented gaming culture. The findings revealed that female players are more vulnerable in gaming spaces, than male players. This was found to be because of stereotypical views of "gamer girls" in a male-dominated and masculine spaces, that leads to harassment, sexualization and systematic disempowerment (ibid.). Many of the survey respondents acknowledged this and tossed the ball to the game developers' court; games should be made a safe and comfortable environment for everyone through the use of different tools and methods.

This study successfully answered the two research questions. When looking into the first research question, the results of this thesis clearly showed that female players do face harassment, and it does affect their gaming habits on some level. Survey responses revealed that the harassment they receive is often sexist and discriminatory. Most respondents reported encountering harassment fairly frequently. Only two of 18 participants said that they had never been harassed, but their later responses to the survey revealed that they actively avoid online multiplayer games. This suggests that every participant of this study who reported playing online multiplayer games, also reported on experiencing harassment while playing. The most commonly mentioned effect of this were diminished desire to play and a need to camouflage one's gender.

The second research question focused on the mechanisms participants used to cope with or even avoid potential harassment. As discussed earlier in the findings section, the most common coping mechanisms included hiding one's gender, avoiding in-game chats, especially voice chat, and playing in a safe environment, such as with close friends. Only one out of eighteen reported on never having to use any coping mechanisms in order to try to avoid getting harassed while playing online multiplayer video games.

The study was successful in its aim to find out whether or not women who game, utilize coping strategies regarding gender-based harassment and if they do, what kind. A large number of the coping strategies identified by the respondents were similar to the ones identified in earlier research, but also some more niche strategies or at least the scope of the strategies. Hiding or camouflaging one's gender was mentioned in a number of the earlier studies, but the lengths some of the participants in this study went to (e.g. utilizing voice changers) seemed rarer in literature.

I find it sad that based on my own experience, people do not speak out or defend other players who get bullied and harassed, in a fear of getting harassed themselves. It would be an important step to take, to defend the one getting harassed, to message to others that harassment is not okay. Sadly, it is so normal that people do not seem to react when that happens. I believe it would be important to reclaim and redefine the term "gamer" and to renew its meaning in line with what gaming culture actually represents today: a diverse community made of people with different genders, sexualities and nationalities.

As mentioned earlier, the online survey part of this thesis did not reach as many respondents as hoped. I dare to argue that the findings from this research would have been broader and fuller, if there were more respondents, since every female player's experiences are different from one another. Still, it is safe to say, according to my own research and the support from previous studies on the same topic, that female players do face gendered harassment and that many of them use different kind of coping mechanisms in order to protect themselves from the harassment, some even as often as each time they play. Both this thesis and the previous research point to a clear problem

in online multiplayer games and the communities surrounding them and it feels like it is the time for a change.

Further research could explore not only toxicity in online gaming cultures even more broadly, but also the specific type of toxicity among female players themselves. From my perspective, it would be valuable to investigate cases where female players are the ones being “toxic” towards other female players. This would reverse the power dynamic explored in this thesis, which highlighted male dominance in gaming spaces, to focus on the toxicity that happens between female players. I believe it would give new perspectives on how we see toxicity and even sexual harassment in online multiplayer games if the focus was also on the point of view of the perpetrator not being male. This could include examining the so called “queen bee phenomenon” (Tang et al., 2020) where women in male-dominated spaces may distance themselves from or even undermine other women in order to maintain status or align with the dominant group. Finally, as briefly touched on before, I have played Overwatch for nine years now, but it has gotten more toxic throughout the years. One reason for this rise in toxicity could be the fact that it became free-to-play in 2022. Thus, another interesting phenomenon to be studied related to the topic of this thesis, would be to find out if free-to-play games are more toxic than games you spend money on.

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