SciencesPo
SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

PUBLIC POLICY MASTER THESIS

April 2023

Run, Hide, Fight: How Female Gamers Understand and React to Sexism and Misogyny in Gaming

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Master in Public Policy
Policy Stream (Digital, New Technology, and Public Policy)

Abstract

Gender-based violence in gaming has received increasing attention from the public in recent years. While the majority of existing studies focus on its cultural root, this research questions how female gamers make sense of their gendered gaming experiences and react to them accordingly. Through 41 in-depth interviews, the study argues that female gamers understand sexism and misogyny in gaming from three dimensions: gaming content, in-game interactions, and the broader gaming community's atmosphere. While the previous two dimensions exert direct impact on female gamers' perceptions of sexism and misogyny in gaming, the indirect intimidation exerted by the community's hostile atmosphere significantly influences two of female gamers' main coping strategies: "run" (quitting multi-player online games or avoiding playing with strangers) and "hide" (concealing female identity cues). As for the last option, "fight", female gamers carefully calculate the social cost of standing out for themselves along two dimensions, their interpersonal relationships with the offender, and the purpose of the perceived offense, which invites further investigation on the juxtaposition of online and offline social interactions in gaming, as well as the reproduction of pre-existing social inequalities.

Key words

Online misogyny, Gaming culture, Gaming behaviors, Sexism in digital culture, Gender roles

Acknowledgements

I thank Professor Jen Schradie, for her inspiring reading recommendations, generous sharing of software license, continuous encouragement as a feminist comrade, steady belief in the potential of this research project from its start, and academic rigor throughout this research project.

I thank every participant in this research for trusting me, a young and inexperienced researcher, sharing their uncomfortable gendered gaming experiences, and cheering me up with their humor and resistance against all kinds of bizarre encounters with long-standing sexism and misogyny in our society.

I thank every friend and colleague who assured me that the choice of research topic was not a superficial anthology of subculture anecdotes but an actually meaningful reflection on an aspect of digital inequalities.

I thank my family for always supporting me to do what I deem I should.

I cannot make this thesis exist without any of them. With their support, I see this thesis not as the end of a journey, but rather a start of my future academic exploration in digital culture and society.

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1. Why should I read this research?

For a long time since video games have emerged as major entertainment sources for contemporary societies, the general public has slept over sexism and misogyny towards women in gaming, taking them as quotidian bickering or melodramas in teenagers' subculture circles. "Boys will be boys" as many would casually brush off incidents they heard about "girl gamers" receiving genital-related curse words and sexual harassment during game play.

However, when the FBI finally decided to intervene in the infamous #Gamergate harassment campaign, as two of its central figures, Briana Wu and Anita Sarkeesian, had to flee from their apartments because of mounting death threats explicitly targeting their addresses due to earlier hacking and doxxing of real identity information. At that point, non-gamers and mainstream media outlets finally realized that "things have gotten out of control". When reading those terrifying threats and cruel comments fueled with hatred, hardly any sane person is able to continue with the "boys will be boys" attitude.

However, the question is: how can things get this bad for being a female in the gaming industry and as a gamer? To answer this question, a growing body of literature has since then researched various aspects of gendered gaming, from its cultural root of geek masculinity to its final expressions of daily flaming, trolling, and harassment endured by female gamers around the world. Within this rich compilation of research, women are almost always portrayed as the mere "targets" of aggressive men, passive like *things*. Only a few recent studies have tried to see gendered gaming from their recipients' point of view, exploring how female gamers react to such a vitriol environment at the behavioral level. Even fewer have questioned *why* they *choose* to act in certain ways, instead of others?

Being a "girl gamer" myself for more than a decade, I ask these questions to myself, as well as I ask these questions to 41 fellow female gamers of different ages, nationalities, cultural backgrounds, education levels, and occupations who joined this research. What they have shown is that female gamers actively contemplate their positions and representations in this community, and carefully consider proper moves in different situations. Some of these agentic moves are actually impressive. In this attempt to bridge female gamers' understanding of gendered gaming experiences to their coping strategies for such experiences, I hope to introduce a more humane way of seeing oppressed participants in a small corner of the gigantic field of contemporary digital culture, and I wish you all a fun read.

2. Introduction

Gaming is one of the fastest growing industries in today's digital economy. In 2021, the global revenue of the online gaming sector reached 23.71 billion USD, while the expected number for 2022 is 23.56 billion, and will further rise to 32.98 billion in 2027 (Statista 2022a). The Covid-19 pandemic has particularly served as the key opportunity for astonishing expansion of its market size, since when people around the world were confined to their homes due to lockdown, gaming was an important exit for daily entertainment. Compared to pre-pandemic time, there was a 39% increase in time spent on video games during the pandemic worldwide (Statista 2022b). More importantly, online games that connect multiple players in real-time have become more than just entertainment options, but emerging virtual social spaces for individuals to both meet new friends and keep in touch with old ones.

However, with heavy interaction among users, problematic behaviors, such as harassment, trolling, and doxxing, have also prevailed in the online gaming scene. Take the United States as an example: in 2021, 83% of gamers reported being harassed in online gaming, ranging from verbal griefing to more serious offenses like physical threats and stalking (Statista 2022c). Among various types of these behaviors, gender-based harassment has been a major issue. In a survey led by Reach3 Insights and Lenovo, 77% of 900 female gamers in the United States, Germany, and China complained about being targeted due to their gender (Research3 Insights 2021). What is especially interesting to notice is that "being targeted by gender" does not only include direct insult and bullying, but also "judgment of skills", "gatekeeping", "patronizing comments", and "unsolicited relationship requests" (Research3 Insights 2021). Thus, the common understanding of online harassment or abuse may not accurately capture the nature of the dilemma female gamers are facing, which is highly diverse and pervasive in the gaming sector.

While the large body of existing research conducted on gender-based aggression towards women in gaming features more or less defined, palpable, and visible expressions of sexism and misogyny, such as sexual harassment, judging of female gamers' gaming competences, online stalking of targeted female player, et cetera, this study tries approaching the issue of gendered gaming experiences without looking for pre-set modes of it. Instead, this study invites female gamers to elaborate on what they see as gendered gaming experiences.

Through 41 in-depth interviews with female gamers from both Chinese-speaking gaming communities and those from English-speaking communities, this research questions female gamers' own conceptualization of gendered gaming experiences, how they make sense of rampant sexism and misogyny in the gaming community, and what coping strategies have been deployed based on their answers to the previous two questions, which strives to understand female gamers' mentalities and their behaviors in a coordinated system.

This research finds that participants, despite their distinct cultural and language backgrounds, shared the struggle of being a female gamer in a globalized industry of video games. The gendered gaming experience is not understood by female gamers as limited during game play, after one logs in into his or her gaming account, and launches a game. Instead, the gendered gaming experiences are perceived by female gamers from three dimensions: gaming content,

interactions with male players in games, and the atmosphere of the broader gaming community. While the previous two sources of gendered gaming experiences exert direct impact on female gamers' perceptions of sexism and misogyny in gaming, the indirect intimidation exerted by the hostile atmosphere of the male-dominated gaming community significantly influences two of female gamers' main coping strategies, which are "run" (quitting multi-player online games or avoiding playing with strangers) and "hide" (concealing female identity cues). Protesting against sexism or misogyny in gaming on the spot is reserved as the last option of "fight". Female gamers carefully calculate the social cost of standing out for themselves along two dimensions, their interpersonal relationships with the offender, and the purpose of perceived offense, which invites further investigation on the juxtaposition of online and offline social interactions in gaming, as well as the reproduction of pre-existing social inequalities in gaming experiences.

3. Interdisciplinary state of knowledge

3.1 General overview of online misogyny

Before diving into further discussion of misogyny in the niche field of gaming, it is important to first review online misogyny and its expressions in the digital environment in general. Online misogyny, also referred to as cyber aggression towards women, cyberbullying of women, gendered cyberhate, networked harassment, and many other names (Ging & Siapera 2018), like other discriminative ideologies, poses significant challenges for digital governance at the global scale.

A small but growing body of interdisciplinary literature has already visited the debate on why we have witnessed online misogyny's rapid development in a short period of time. Technical affordances provided by digital platforms are commonly accused for not only spreading misogyny but also other harmful information, such as anonymity and sharing functions that make "go viral" for personal content unprecedentedly easy (Stoeffel 2014; Jeong 2015; Massanari 2017). The broader picture of the "cool geek dude" digital culture since early days of the Internet, which is traditionally dominated by white males, is also considered to be a deeper socio-cultural root for today's online misogyny (Banet-Weiser & Miltner 2016). Considering the particular background of the fourth wave of feminism which sets the Internet as its main battlefield, the upsurge of online misogyny is also viewed as a disciplinary measure, aiming to scare away women who actively participate in online public spheres (Cole 2015; Banet-Weiser & Miltner 2016; Thompson 2018; Boyle & Rathnayake 2020; Barker & Jurasz 2019). Apart from socio-cultural theories for online misogyny, a materialist perspective may also argue that misogynistic efforts online are in fact reflections of offline exclusion of women from engaging in the global techno-capitalist production (Siapera 2019).

Existing literature on online misogyny includes two major focuses: the discourse of online misogyny, and the organization of online misogyny. Many works focusing on misogynistic discourses have more or less a descriptive inclination, since they intend to answer "what is online misogyny?" in the first place, which is a challenging task due to highly versatile forms of expression of misogyny, and the constantly evolving nature of popular culture online. Mantilla (2013) proposed "gendertrolling" to capture characteristics of a wide array of misogynistic conducts targeting women online, emphasizing on a) a concerted participation of numerous people; b) gender-based insults; c) vicious language; d) credible threats that could cause real-life consequences; e) continuously attacking certain targets; f) particular malice towards women speaking out about sexism (Mantilla 2013: 564-565). Often sugarcoating with a humorous or casual tone, gendertrolling blurs the boundary between joking and inflicting patriarchal power over targets, which reinforces the gendered realities of humiliating and oppressing women as daily trivial issues.

Jane (2014b), noticing the blatantly sexualized nature of a large amount of misogynistic messages circulating online, coined the term "e-bile" to describe online misogyny's common employment of graphic depiction of sexual violence that aims to offend and to provoke the target. She especially stresses on a seemingly self-contradictory rationale of the online

misogynistic discourse, called the "lascivious contempt" (Jane 2014a), referring to the mob simultaneously threatening their targets with sexual violence and insulting them for being ugly, fat, old, or slutty. As previously mentioned numerous names of online misogyny suggest, such as aggression, violence, abuse, and bullying, a large volume of existing studies recognize online misogyny for its straight-forward expressions of assault (Ging & Siapera 2018). However, despite that direct *ad hoc* threats and insults centered around sex and appearance constitute the large majority of online misogyny, like the two scholars above have observed, there are more nuanced expressions of misogyny in the spectrum not included in the current discussion of online misogyny, such as patronizing comment or gatekeeping in certain areas of digital culture participation that does not intend to harm specific individuals (Nakamura 2017), which is more difficult to discern.

Contrasting Jane and Mantilla's understanding of misogynistic discourse as a weapon to assault women online, Moloney and Love (2017) take the performance dimension of gender, and understand online misogyny as "virtual manhood acts" (VMA), which places proving and safeguarding one's masculinity at the center through "draw[ing] on and enact[ing] the hegemonic ideals of manhood via technologically facilitated textual and visual cues." (Moloney & Love 2017: 6). More importantly, as VMA emphasizes on interactive, and essentially performative, behaviors that constitute manhood, a biological male body is no more the predominant criterion for practicing online misogyny or being exempted from it, which expands the scope of researching online misogyny from cisgender straight males to "all genders may enact manhood and claim the concomitant power offered by the hegemony of men" (Moloney & Love 2017: 8).

Compared to studies concentrating on the discourse of online misogyny, those studying the organization of it pay attention to the circulating patterns of misogynistic language in personal networks instead of the language itself. Tileagă (2019) suggests that by examining online misogyny under the lens of online contentious politics, the rapid spread of misogyny across the Internet could be better understood in "large scale action networks", in which misogynistic conducts play the role of "connective actions" that do not originate from formal organizational resources and cohesive collective identities, but rather spontaneous personalized public engagement on digital media networks (Bennett & Segerberg 2012). The lack of institutionalized nature of online misogynist groups is also addressed by another concept of "manosphere", which is "a loose online network…a set of blogs, podcasts, and forums comprised of pickup artists, men's rights activists, anti-feminists, and fringe groups." (Marwick & Caplan 2018: 543). Attempting to include everyone in the circle, the concept of "manosphere" risks being an over-generalized umbrella term, but it also offers a clear distinction between the so-called "alpha males" and "beta males" among its participants, who are those fantasized dominating male figures and the victims of the feminism (Ging 2019), reminding us of the intra-group divergence of motivations behind converting to misogyny.

However, no matter perceiving the Internet as a huge action network for misogynists or the manosphere, a key problem awaiting to be addressed is that the Internet is not a homogenous space, where misogynist groups are uniformly distributed in every corner. As existing studies have pointed out that some digital spaces, such as Reddit (Massanari 2017; Farrell et al. 2019), are more frequented by misogynists, there will be more condensed clots of participants

on large scale action networks of online misogyny on certain platforms, and within those action networks, the stratification between more engaged actors and those peripheral members, as well as differences among their perceptions of desired masculinities, should be also taken into consideration for future research on the dissemination of online misogyny. Particularly, studies have pointed out that gaming sites have been serving as hotbeds for the reproduction and diffusion of online misogyny, as well as other exclusionary ideologies (United Nations Office of Counter Terrorism, 2022; Kowert et al., 2022; Taylor & Voorhees 2018), which signifies the pressing need for understanding the intersection between gaming and online misogyny. Thus, in the next section, I will discuss how a peculiar branch of masculinity, geek masculinity, has been shaped in the gaming culture (the discourse of geek masculinity), and how the geek community's emphasis on the authenticity of members' identity intertwines with other social, technological, and psychological factors to brew a hostility towards women (the organization of geek masculinity).

3.2 Understanding toxic "geek" masculinity

Perhaps the most intuitive route for approaching the concept of geek masculinity is to discuss the #Gamergate. Starting in 2014 and lasting for roughly a year, it was probably the first incident that raised the general public's awareness of persistent misogyny in the gaming sector, instead of leaving it as skirmishes within subculture groups. After this massive online trolling and harassment campaign that targets female public figures in the gaming industry broke out in 2014, it has become almost impossible for anyone investigating the dynamics of gender issues within the gaming sector to not pay attention to this watershed event in the history of (at least English-speaking) gaming. Despite that #Gamergate has attracted great attention from media and researchers, it is quite difficult to tell what #Gamergate was exactly, due to its loosely organized characteristic. Participants were scattered across the Internet, usually seen on Twitter, Reddit, 4chan, and 8chan forums. There was no widely-recognized central figure or any authoritative leader among the angry mob of #Gamergate, nor did this campaign publish any specific agenda or guideline for supporters. Nevertheless, its decentralized and spontaneous participation at the same time reminds us of the omnipresence of this strong resentment towards female presence within the gaming community.

The starting point of the whole #GamerGate chaos was not explosive at all: the ex-boyfriend of a female game developer, Zoe Quinn, falsely accused her for an unethical sexual relationship with a male journalist reporting on the gaming industry, in exchange for press coverage and career advancement, claiming that Quinn was an example of attention-thirsty females undermining the integrity of the gaming industry. The post went viral on 4chan and Reddit. Eventually, the grievances around its discussion gathered under the Twitter hashtag #Gamergate, leading to massive harassment campaigns, which later escalated to heightened flaming, hacking Quinn's accounts on various platforms, doxxing (spreading one's personal information online, including real name, workplace, home address, etc.), as well as violent death and rape threats. As this witch-hunt brewed up, other female figures in the gaming sector who openly supported Quinn, such as feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian and independent developer Brianna Wu, were also targeted by the lynch mob. As discussed in the

previous section, physical and especially sexual abuse of the female body are common themes in online misogyny. Sarkeesian, publicly known for her website *Feminist Frequency* and her outspoken criticisms of widespread misogyny in video games (Sarkeesian 2012a), have received pictures of her being raped by game characters and was featured in the indie game *Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian*, in which players are invited to click their mouses and watch her getting beaten into a pulp (Sarkeesian 2012b). When online violence started to infiltrate the offline, the public eventually became alert to the sheer scale of malice directed at women who dared to speak against misogyny in gaming. Sarkeesian had to cancel her appearance for the Game Developers Choice Award in 2014 because of an anonymous email sent to the event's organizers, which threatened a bomb attack (Totilo 2014). Meanwhile, her home address, as well as Briana Wu's, was leaked and spreaded on the Internet, leading to mounting death and rape threats which explicitly mentioned this information. With such credible life threats, both Wu and Sarkeesian had to flee their homes and seek legal support, marking the tipping-point of the FBI's investigation of these cyber hate crimes (MacDonald 2014; D.I. 2014).

These episodes of vile abuses displayed in the #Gamergate was astonishingly enough, but what this Internet saga has further warned the public was its significance to the ideological polarization of online political culture in the 2010s, and that it appeared as a vivid trailer of the rise of the larger alt-right movement during the Trump era (Johanssen 2021; Warzel 2019; Hawley 2017; Wagner 2014). From targeting "corrupted and bad-faith females" inside the gaming industry to creating an army of bot accounts to impersonate radical feminists posting ridiculous content such as #EndFathersDay on Twitter (Warzel 2019), the #Gamergate campaign grew rapidly to a fully-fledged "Internet cultural war" declared against feminist intruders backed by "overly political correct, social justice warriors, [and] the media elite"(Wagner 2014). Even without a clear manifesto promulgated to the audience, the core message was clear enough: #GamerGate was about who has the power to define the identity of "gamer", and obviously, its participants were not willing to include women in the process of negotiating this identity or delineating the community's boundaries (Massanari 2016).

To understand #Gamergate supporters' emphasis on rejecting any criticism or interpretation of the gaming culture by female actors, one has to first understand what they perceive as a "true gamer" or a "geek". In most contexts, geek as a slang depicts a white, young, middle-class male who is strongly interested in, or even obsessed with digital technology and its cultural products, such as video games (Taylor, 2012; Braithwaite 2016; Kendall 2011). As Edidin (2012) satirically commented on the gendered premise of this slang: "There's a GeekGirlCon, but no GeekGuyCon: every con[1] is GeekGuyCon, unless it specifies otherwise. You don't say 'geek guys' the way you say 'geek girls': once you've said 'geek', the 'guy' is pretty much taken as read." Taylor (2012) in her extensive examination of professional gaming scenes, further marks that the knowledge and skills in this particular field are not only sources of social connections, but more importantly, criteria for inclusion and exclusion from an identity that one is supposed to "earn it". The insistence on working hard enough and performing well enough as prerequisites for being recognized as a geek by other geeks is a repeating theme in the gaming community's criticism of female gamers who allegedly only play casual games, claiming that they are not qualified to proclaim themselves as gamers and thus should not

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[1] "Con" is an abbreviation for convention, such as a gaming convention or anime convention.

have a say on the gaming industry (Kowert, Breuer & Quandt 2017; Paul 2018; Soderman 2018; Kidd & Turner 2016).

While a meritocratic geek identity is constantly reinforced by the gaming community, another major theme that constitutes the discourse of being a geek is their marginalization and victimhood in mainstream society. Taking probably the most embraced depiction of geeks in popular culture, *The Big Bang Theory*, as an example, Salter and Blodgett (2017) observe that the textbook examples of geek covered by this heated TV series are intelligent, socially awkward, unattractive on appearance, helplessly obsessed with comic books, science fictions, and video games, and they are often being misunderstood, isolated, or mocked by people who do not know them well, which have long been stereotypical images of geeks (Kowert et al. 2014). To create comedic effects, the show makes incessant comparisons between the geeky main group and other male characters who conform to the traditional sense of masculinity—tall and strong, athletic, favored by women, and holding no interest for geeky past-times or things that require intellectual efforts—which suggests that this geek masculinity is at the opposite end of the hegemonic masculinity, a less aggressive expression of masculinity.

Although through telling the same "geeks getting bullied (either in a joking fashion or not) by non-geeks" story, *The Big Bang Theory*'s demonstration of geeks positions them at a marginalized and oppressed position of our society, the storyline of geek male leads in *The Big Bang Theory* is still "flexing…particular form of masculinity to craft social and sexual success", since they are unable to achieve masculine dominance in traditional spaces, they need to "carve out and to build their own institutions and definitions of masculinity to excel" (Salter & Blodgett 2017: 3-4). Salter and Blodgett (2017) characterize *The Big Bang Theory*'s alternative way of asserting manliness among its main characters as a reflection of "hypermasculinity" in the geek culture, which describes an obsession with exaggerating masculine cultural stereotypes in subculture, including masculine behavioral patterns, personality traits, as well as hostility towards what is conventionally considered as feminine, echoing with earlier researches on how gender hierarchy and gender roles are tenaciously preserved in various cyberspaces, as well as the default setting of computer-related culture being (and should be) created by men and for men (Turkle 1997; Kendall 2002; Rosewarne 2016).

As illustrated in *The Big Bang Theory*, the binary identity construction of geek vs. non-geek struggle is at the core of this technocratic discourse. Such "us vs. them" rationale in framing their interaction with the outside world highlights that the geek space and the geek identity are heavily policed by their members. In 1994, John DuBois, a U.S. software engineer created the website *The Armory*. Calling it a "geek house", which refers to a website dedicated to geek content and hosting fellow geeks, DuBois and his "housemates" have created a long list of "purity tests" to "gauge how "pure" you are within some realm of experience by having you answer a list of questions regarding which acts, etc. associated with the subject you have engaged in" (The Armory, 1994). The lower score you get in those tests, the more hardcore you are in that corresponding field. The geeky series of purity tests on *The Armory* is one of the earliest diagnosis of geekiness available online, hosting its iconic *Geek Purity Test* and *Nerd Purity Test* (test takers are free to choose between the 100 points version and the 500

points version), along with many other tests designed for assessing one's acquaintance with a particular area of geek culture, such as *World of Warcraft*, the signature MMORPG game developed by Blizzard, and *Wheel of Time*, the fantasy fiction series written by Robert Jordan.[2] By the time I tried to determine how geek I was in April 2023, the *Geek Purity Test* had received 191,614 answers since its publication in 1995. This number, along with the test's longevity and the large number of inspired geek tests on the Internet, tells the persistent need of geeks to confirm their identities to a certain extent.

Your Geek Purity Test Results

You answered "yes" to ☐ of 129 questions, making you ▓▓% geek pure; that is, you are ▓▓% pure in the geek domain (you have ▓▓% geek in you).
Your *Weirdness Factor* (AKA *Uniqueness Factor*) is ▓%, based on a comparison of your test results with 191614 other submissions for this test.

The average purity for this test is 80.1%.
The first submission for this test was received December 30, 1995.

Return to The Armory's Purity Test Page
Go to the Armory Home Page
The purity test *SCORING SYSTEM* is maintained by John DuBois (spcecdt@armory.com)
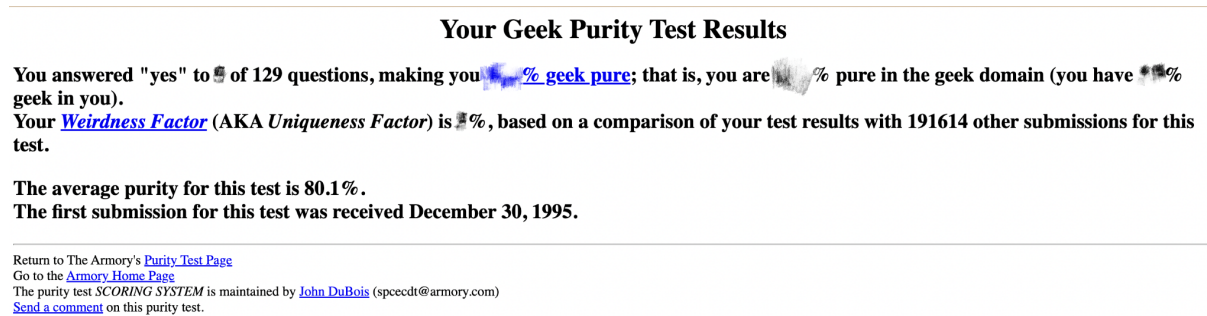Send a comment on this purity test.

Figure 1. Screenshot taken of my *Geek Purity Test* results on April 20th, 2023.

In the *Geek Purity Test*, 129 questions are designed to measure the respondent's "geekishness" from multiple aspects, including social skills, interpersonal relationships, knowledge and experience in the STEM field and especially computer science, and personal habits in daily life. Apart from broader questions such as "Do you know more about computers than the human body?", "Do you reprogram your keyboard into your own custom layout?", and "Do you spend more money on your computer than your significant other?", many questions in the test assume the respondent to be a biological man. There are questions explicitly mentioning the male body (e.g. "Is your computer's case size comparative to your manhood (a phallic symbol)?), and also questions closely tied to men's routine behaviors (e.g. "Have you put on deodorant less than once in the past month?, "Do you adjust yourself in public?") (The Armory, 1995). In the case of a female taking this geek test, which happened to be mine, the test prevents her from being recognized as a legitimate geek by its fundamental design, which further entrenched the identity construction of geek being masculine in the first place.

As low purity scores serve as honorable badges for members of *The Amory*, these "geekishness" tests foster senses of exclusivity and power brought by deftness in digital technology within geek cyberspaces (Salter & Blodgett 2017). Furthermore, the idea of "geekishness" being measurable and open for judgements, as there exists the distinction between true geeks and fake/peripheral geeks, leads to a hierarchy of the geek identity and boundary policing within the community (Busse 2017; Salter & Blodgett 2017; Ortiz 2019). Given that being or acting feminine is by default placed at the bottom of this hierarchy of conformity with the masculine geek canon, it helps us to understand why the geek community has reacted so fiercely towards "fake geek girls" (Edidin 2012) and the contentious presence of feminists within geek cyberspaces, who seek to subvert the masculine norms of being a geek (Salter & Blodgett 2012; Braithwaite 2014). Consalvo (2012) further points out that the

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[2] Unfortunately, despite that the main series of "geekishness" purity tests are still active and frequently visited till April 2023, the long chain of tests dedicated to more specific geeky subjects are already expired and inaccessible.

gaming community tied together by the geek identity was not merely triggered by the female presence itself in the shared space, but more importantly, by the *increasingly visible* female presence in the gaming scenes, as the Internet and digital devices have become more and more accessible for the general public, which poses a sense of threat to male gamers and thus leads to their violent counter-strike in recent years.

Since the early days of studying online behaviors and digital participation, men's sexist aggression targeting women in cyberspace has been frequently explored by scholars (Scharrer 2004; Norris 2004; Herring 1999; Cassell & Jenkins 2000). Aiming to explore how men's sexist and misogynistic get expressed in online spaces, many studies approach this mechanism from a psychological point of view. Due to the anonymous nature of most online communication, deindividualization and disinhibition effects are argued to be particularly pronounced by male gamers (Fox & Tang 2014). Because one cannot identify the person on the other side of the screen as an individual, one becomes more prone to categorize others using stereotypes of different social groups (Lea & Spears 1991) and to interact with that person in a codified manner. More importantly, the anonymity of online communication and deindividualized online persona of a user also lead to minimal accountability of personal behaviors on the Internet, leading to behavioral disinhibition from social norms (Postmes, Spears & Lea 1998; Fox & Tang 2017; Fox, Cruz & Lee 2015), which often result in harassment, trolling, and flaming.

As previous psychological studies investigating men's toxic behaviors against women online are conducted under the premise that men's sexist attitudes towards women are not developed online but rather transmitted online, researchers also actively look for sociological predictors of men's online expression of sexist and misogynistic ideologies. Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) has been found to be a robust predictor of cyber-aggression towards women (Tang & Fox 2016; Fox & Tang 14; Kasumovic & Kuznekoff 2015; Tang, Reer & Quandt 2020; Jagayat & Choma 2021). Developed by Pratto and her colleagues for measuring one's preference of inequality among social groups (Pratto et al. 1994), existing literature argues that SDO is closely linked to hostile sexism when measuring men's acceptance of gender inequality. When set in the gaming context, SDO and hostile sexism can be captured by the Video Game Sexist Scale (VGSS) designed by Fox & Tang (2014: 319), which is composed of 16 common stereotypes of female gamers (e.g. "Most women who play video games just do so with their boyfriends", "Women who call themselves gamer girls think they deserve special treatment", "If a woman plays with a team or guild, she is almost always the weakest link", etc.). While a strong correlation is found between SDO and VGSS, other personality traits such as the need for heterosexual self-presentation (Fox & Tang 2014), identification as a gamer (Tang, Reer & Quandt 2020), and right-wing authoritarianism (Jagayat & Choma 2021) have also been recognized as reliable predictors of sexist beliefs in gaming.

Furthermore, moving a step beyond the unitary perception of sexism, Jagayat and Choma (2021) distinguish different roles played by hostile sexism and benevolent sexism in the expression of sexist attitudes towards women in gaming. They note that while hostile sexism is closely linked to SDO, the benevolent sexism, usually demonstrated by non-aggressive languages and actions, is more connected with the commitment to traditional gender roles and

gendered cultural norms, which echoes with the distinction between the expression of aggressive masculinity and complicit masculinity in gaming highlighted by Chandler (2019). As men with aggressive masculinity traits take more violent and direct actions of harassment, those with complicit masculinity, who are happy with maintaining the gendered status quo of gaming, are more likely to give patronizing but not aggressive comments. Despite scholars' efforts in understanding men's deliberation of different forms of masculinity in gaming (Chandler 2019; Ortiz 2019), so far there has been no research examining whether female gamers perceive this divergence or not, and if they perceive it, will they adjust their answers to sexism and misogyny in gaming according to this perceived divergence? Therefore, this research intends to fill this gap of knowledge by questioning female gamers not only how they react, but also how they understand the nature of sexist and misogynistic speech and actions they have encountered in gaming.

3.3 Female representation in video games and gendered gaming experiences

Existing literature investigating the marginalization and harassment of female players in gaming have developed two major directions of explaining this phenomenon. The toxic geek masculinity which dominates the gaming industry is one of them, and the other focus on research is the representation of genders, particularly female characters, in gaming content. Kowert and her colleagues (2017) propose a progressional model of sexist exclusion in gaming, whereas as the initial stage of this theoretical model, the geek masculinity sets a gendered culture of gaming, and discourages females from participating in game-related activities. A lack of female working in the gaming industry then leads to the production of gendered gaming content (the second stage), which further reinforces the sexist and misogynistic beliefs of gamers and contributes to male gamers' related behaviors (the final stage). As the key chain that bridges the culture of misogyny in gaming and the behavioral results of such culture, the (re)production of gendered gaming content and its effects on players have been extensively studied.

Throughout decades of researches conducted in the gaming field, scholars have reached a general consensus on major problems of female representation in video games: 1) there are much fewer female characters than male characters; 2) there are even fewer female characters who are important and meaningful to the storytelling of games; 3) female characters' appearances have a much higher chance of being hypersexualized than male characters (Shaw 2015; Downs & Smith 2010; Williams et al. 2019; Burgess et al. 2007; Dill & Thill 2007; Dill et al. 2005; Martins et al. 2009; Lynch et al. 2016; Beasley & Standley 2002; Scharrer 2004; Dietz 1998). Problematic depictions of female characters do not only include hypersexualization, such as making them wear sexy clothes and reveal their voluptuous bodies. Downs and Smith (2010) also point out that female bodies in video games are often unrealistic, as an average woman may need to rely on plastic surgery or chemical injection to achieve such appearance, or even with these interventions, to pursue typical female characters' bodies characterized by disproportionately thin waist, long legs, and large breasts is still impossible. The unrealistic female characters in video games are not only observed from the physical dimension but also from the personality dimension. A classical binary

imagination of women in gaming is the virgin and the vamp. In most cases, female characters fall into one of the two categories: they are either gentle, weak, and submissive, or they are sexy and dangerous, who seek to take control over men through weaponizing her sexual attractiveness (Fox & Bailenson 2009). While examining those female characters with their storytelling functions, Sarkeesian (2015) argues that despite there are differences in their personalities, such as the contrast between the innocent "damsel in distress" who needs the male hero's rescue and the more aggressive, manipulative "vamp", female characters are either functioning like sexy background decorations or rewards of the male protagonist's actions: their bodies and sexuality are always emphasized before their characters. Despite the fact that there are "evolved" female characters or even female protagonists in video games, showing they can at the same time be proactive, strong, and sexually attractive, like Laura Cruz in the popular *Tomb Raider* series, being visually agreeable for the presumably straight male audience is still the premise of character design (Kennedy 2002; Lynch et al. 2016; Tompkins et al. 2020).

The emphasis on the female characters being "eye candies" for the male audience in not just video games but visual media in general is conceptualized by what Laura Mulvey's ([1975] 1989) proposes as "male gaze" in her landmark essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". Under the male gaze, female characters in visual media's primary purpose is to satisfy the voyeuristic pleasure of heterosexual male spectators with the erotic presentation of their objectified bodies. As Mulvey's analysis of male gaze is based on the representation of female characters in film, she notes that with the moving and shifting of the camera that leads the male spectator to scan over the female body, the media of film suggests a particularly way of looking at the female body, and it further enables a sense of intrusion and control of the female trapped behind the screen. Although Mulvey did not touch on video games in her original essay, several studies on the representation of female characters have applied this theoretical framework in interpreting the hypersexualization of women in games (Kennedy 2002; Kirkland 2009; Jennings 2018).

Furthermore, Galloway (2006) notes that the power of being the active controller of looking at a passive object who cannot walk away from the status of being watched is further amplified by the media of video games, because players now are not simply spectators, but are actual controllers of the camera. No matter playing a third-person perspective game or a more immersive first-person one, the player always has some degree of freedom to determine the vision on his or her screen by moving the camera to different directions, scrolling up and down, zooming in and out. That being said, looking in gaming further emphasizes on the active and agentic status of the gazing player (Jennings 2018). Given the prevalent hypersexualization of female characters in video games, the power dynamics between the dominant position of a male gazer to the passive position of the female body is further entrenched.

Moreover, as video games are all designed in the fundamental logic of "the player takes certain actions codified by the system and the system gives back correspondent feedback to the player", video games are essentially algorithmic: interactive, responsive, repetitive (Bogost 2010). By creating a virtual reality built on numerous loops of programmed behavioral input and output, video games can be persuasive or even disciplinary. Although

there are rare cases of male players challenging the sexualized portrayals of female characters in games (Ishii 2014), established empirical studies on the cognitive impact of sexist gaming content on gamers have also supported general positive correlations between playing games with sexualized depictions of women and holding sexist and misogynistic attitudes towards women, as well as between playing those games and actually sexually harassing female gamers or verballing abusing them (Dill & Thill 2007; Dill, Brown & Collins 2008; Fox & Bailenson 2009; Behm-Morawitz & Mastro 2009; Yao, Mahood & Linz 2009; Fox & Potocki 2016; Gabbiadini et al. 2016; McCullough, Wong & Stevenson 2019). Some scholars also warn the long-term effects of exposure to problematic portrayals of women in video games, arguing that sexist and misogynistic beliefs influenced by gaming content may also leads to higher probability of tolerating sexual harassment and rape myth acceptance in real life (Fox & Potocki 2016; Dill, Brown & Collins 2008). Studies also show that not just male gamers but also female players are more inclined to accept sexist and misogynistic beliefs after exposure to such video games, particularly in which their avatars are hypersexualized, leading to the internalization of misogyny (McCullough, Wong & Stevenson 2019; Fox, Bailenson & Tricase 2013).

The misogynistic representation of women in gaming also expands from in-game female characters to female gamers in the community. Going back to the #Gamergate turmoil, we have an official mascot named Vivian James created by the crowd-funding collaboration of 4chan /v/ forum users and *The Fine Young Capitalist*, an organization encouraging underrepresented populations' participation in the media industry. Designed to show inclusiveness among #Gamergate participants for a better public image, Vivian James is intentionally designed to be a "true" female gamer, who simply loves playing video games and does not really care about rights, agenda, and other "hypocrisy". Vivian Jame' personality, captured by her slogan "shut up and play", is a dangerous sign of male gamers' imagination of their female counterparts, as it "exemplifies how #gamergate wants women to 'shut up' about their negative experiences of gaming, and the precarious inclusion that women have in the new gaming public" (Butt & Apperley 2018: 44).

While on one hand, there is Vivian James representing the authentic female gamers, there are also imaginations of female gamers circulating within the gaming community. For example, female gamers and professional female esports players are often labeled as "attention-seeking" and "looking for favors from successful male players in exchange of their sexual resources" for their unsolicited intrusion into a male-dominated world (Apperley 2022; Taylor, Jenson & de Castell 2009), which justifies sexually harassing and slut-shaming female gamers with the "they are asking for it" logic. The imagination of female gamers being "attention-seeking" or "wanting to be gazed upon" corresponds with the live experiences of being called a slut by male gamers, a major theme in the famous *Fat, Ugly or Slutty* blog,[3] where female gamers are invited to post their encounters with sexism and misogyny in gaming and to foster solidarity with each other.

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[3] *Fat, Ugly, or Slutty* was created in 2011 as an online archive of sexual harassment and verbal abuses targeting female gamers. It ceased operation in 2023, but a large number of posts can still be retrieved from the *Internet Archive* (archive.org).

Stereotypes about female gamers' personalities are commonly seen, while stereotypes about their gaming behaviors and competence are equally prevalent. Female gamers are often assumed to be interested in playing casual games or games with traditionally feminine topics; when they try to play "hardcore" action/adventure/strategy games, they are expected to have poor gaming skills (Cassell & Jenkins 2000; Kowert, Breuer & Quandt 2017; Eklund 2016; Vermeulen & Van Looy 2016). The assumption of "girls can't play" is rather pronounced in professional esports communities (Witkowski 2018). For example, in 2018, a North American *Overwatch* Contender League club, Second Wind, announced its decision to recruit Ellie as its new player. Being an anonymous player who ranked 4th on the North American competitive ladder by the time of the recruitment, Ellie faced mounting doubts about her gaming competency from people watching clips of her previous games (Smith 2019). However, a large part of the skepticism did not question whether Ellie could be cheating or not because no one had seen her playing in person, but rather her presumed female identity[4] that made it unlikely for her to play that well (Friman & Ruotsalainen 2022).

With a growing literature on stereotyped representations of females in gaming and on heavily gendered gaming experiences of female gamers, few studies have explored how female players themselves, targets of everyday sexism and misogyny in the gaming community, develop their coping strategies for aforementioned phenomena. Quitting (either quitting entirely from playing video games or quitting from multi-player games), camouflaging gender cues (muting one's voice or using a voice changer to make one sound like a man), and showing off advanced gaming skills are observed as common responses from female gamers (Cote 2015; Fox & Tang 2017; McLean & Griffiths 2019; Bergstrom 2019). Based on existing findings on female gamers' reactions to sexism and misogyny in gaming, this research intends to further question how female players develop certain coping strategies on the individual level and on a collective basis, and why they choose certain coping strategies instead of others based on their understanding of their encounters with sexism and misogyny in gaming.

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

RQ 1: What kind of behavior will be identified as sexist or misogynistic by female gamers?

RQ 2: How do female gamers understand different forms of sexism and misogyny displayed by male gamers?

RQ 3: Based on their understanding of various sexist or misogynistic acts in gaming, what coping strategies are developed by female gamers, individually or collectively, in different scenarios of gaming?

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[4] Ellie was in fact not a female player, but a fake account created by a male player named "Punisher" for the purpose of "social experiment". This was revealed on January 4, 2019, two days after Ellie's announcement of quitting professional gaming due to misogynistic harassment and threats.

4. Methodology, data, and sources

Data collection

In order to address three research questions proposed above, which especially emphasizes on the exploration of why female gamers respond in certain ways instead of only documenting their coping strategies, this research draws on 41 in-depth semi-structured interviews with self-identified female gamers. 30 participants are recruited through snowball sampling, and 11 participants are recruited from online gaming forums and chat rooms.

Initially, I was interested in comparing gamers from different language backgrounds. As games are produced and marketed in different languages, the ability to speak a certain language operates as a natural barrier to accessing certain games. Considering the fact that most popular games are produced by American and East-Asian studios, as well as the currently booming gaming market size of the Asia-Pacific region led by the Chinese market (Gaikwad 2022), I decided to recruit both gamers who reside in English-speaking gaming communities and those who reside in Chinese-speaking gaming communities, in order to capture potential differences among gendered gaming experiences brought by regional characteristics. However, as the interviews went on, I realized that many Chinese gamers were also highly active in playing games in English or Japanese. Moreover, participants' detailed descriptions of their gendered gaming experiences do not show any significant differences brought by the divergence of their languages and cultural backgrounds. Instead, female gamers participating in this research demonstrate that sexism and misogyny are very much universal problems faced by women in gaming. Thus, this research will not distinguish quotes from Chinese-speaking gamers to English-speaking gamers in the results and analysis.

Interviews were conducted from late January 2023 to late March 2023. Potential participants who showed interest were sent a document which included a brief description of this research project, a list of sample questions, and their basic rights as participants. Potential participants were informed that there could be questions about details of their traumatic experiences as female gamers, but they were free to refuse answering specific questions or to stop the interview at any time. Those who agreed to take the interview sent back the document with their signatures. All interviews are conducted online, using Zoom or WeChat's live chat functions. Among 41 participants, 40 of them agreed to have the interview audio recorded. Chinese-speaking participants were free to choose Chinese as the interview language to ensure smooth narration of their gaming experiences and related thoughts. After completing all interviews, audio-files were transcribed, in which Chinese-based interviews were translated into English. A few participants also sent me text-based supplementary comments after their interviews, which were also included in their transcripts. All identifying information was removed from the transcripts. participants were invited to give me their preferred pseudonyms. Some chosen pseudonyms for this research were altered to be different from their usernames of their social media accounts, and usernames of their gaming accounts, in order to ensure complete confidentiality.

Rationale of recruiting participants from both online gaming communities and snowball sampling

The original design of this research was to conduct a pilot study which relied on snowball sampling of 5 to 10 participants, aiming to gain preliminary information about: 1) how female gamers would make sense of their experiences; 2) what kind of issues would concern them the most; 3) and how I should adjust future interview questions accordingly for creating a more comfortable setting for participants to share their personal stories. Following this planned pilot study, the majority of participants would be recruited from mainstream online forums frequented by gamers in the English-speaking world and China correspondingly. Particularly, I chose forums which clearly stated their purpose for hosting female gamers, in order to prevent female gamers who express interest in participation or support for this project getting harassed by hostile male gamers active in the same forum. More importantly, as I wish to examine if female gamers have reached any level of consensus regarding their understanding of sexism and misogyny in gaming, or have negotiated any sort of collective response for those shared problems, given that female gamers do actively share and discuss sexism and misogyny in gaming on several dedicated websites and blogs like *Fat, Ugly, or Slutty* and *Not In The Kitchen Anymore* (Nakamura 2019), it is tempting to further investigate whether these online forums may serve as "online feminist safe spaces" that raise awareness, foster solidarity, and bring forth collective actions (Clark-Parsons 2018).

However, my requests for posting participant recruitment were all rejected by English-speaking forum moderators after I tried with three subreddit forums and three publicly visible Discord servers. On the other hand, my requests for recruitment were accepted by two Chinese-speaking discussion groups on Douban. The striking difference between the Chinese-speaking gaming communities and those English-speaking ones is unexpected, especially regarding the blunt and defensive attitudes displayed by those English-speaking moderators. Most of them simply said "no" to my research request, and refused to hear my further explanation. Two of them permanently banned my account from their communities after rejecting me.

Rejections are more understandable for subreddits, because anyone can create a Reddit account and post on any subreddit page, which makes it impossible for moderators to verify the real identity and intention of self-reported researchers, even though I gave my real name, affiliated institution, and work contact information in my request in accordance with the research ethics. Rejections from Discord servers are more confusing, as all three Discord servers I had contacted required me to verify my female identity before I could post anything or join any group chat: taking a selfie of me holding a piece of paper, on which I wrote the exact date and time at the moment of sending the identity verification message, as well as other designated words varying across Discord servers. As explained by the welcome message sent to newcomers, this measure was deployed for preventing men from sneaking in and scamming members. Furthermore, after the identity verification, I was also required to fill out a survey about my favorite game genres and gaming devices, along with a short self-introduction about my gaming hobbies, to confirm me as a genuine gamer. Unfortunately, as none of the aforementioned online communities have given specific reasons for their

rejections, it is unlikely for this research to address this contrast between English-speaking and Chinese-speaking gaming communities' attitudes regarding outside researchers.

One possible explanation of this discrepancy is racial discrimination, as Clark-Parsons (2018) have pointed out in her digital ethnography of a Facebook-based online female safe space that in the feminist group dominated by cisgender white women, racial minorities and other underrepresented population groups are largely marginalized. Another more plausible explanation is the sense of vulnerability one may experience when being asked to recall unpleasant or even traumatic experiences of being a target of sexual harassment or other forms of gender-based attacks, and to share these experiences with a stranger. We may have a glimpse of the sense of this vulnerability from the word choices of two moderators. One of them understood my recruitment as "soliciting", and the other one replied to my follow-up question regarding the rejection with "because we are not research subjects". Members of online gaming communities like these may have experiences with participating in research projects before, because more than one (like in the second screenshot below) moderators informed me that they were "*currently* not accepting [research] requests", as well as the existence of previous research specifically featuring the subreddit r/gaming, one of the largest online forums for gamers (Maloney, Roberts & Graham 2019). Being observed and analyzed by outsiders may evoke a feeling of being watched by the mainstream as "circus animals", which suggests an imbalance in the power dynamics between the researcher and research participants.

Figure 2. Screenshot of my communication with a subreddit moderator.

Figure 3. Screenshot of my communication with a subreddit moderator.

The sense of vulnerability expressed by community moderators I have contacted signified the importance of trust-worthiness for recruiting participants in this particular research. One moderator who notified me about their group decision of not allowing me to conduct research

within the community had nevertheless expressed her personal interest in this project. Becoming a participant, she also introduced me to her private Discord server with close female gamer friends, where I got in touch with another participant who also brought me to another private Discord server. Thus, I adjusted the sampling method to more snowball sampling, which significantly facilitated the recruitment process. With regard to the limitation of snowball sampling being biased by my social network, a screening of potential participants' age, occupation sector, geographic location, and education level was deployed in order to prevent participants clogging from similar social backgrounds.

Another crucial reason for using snowball sampling through offline channels is to avoid only involving gamers who are devoted enough to actively participate in online gaming communities (Cote 2015). As existing literature has already highlighted the common stereotype of women being associated with the stigmatized image of "casual gamers" instead of "true gamers", leading to the marginalization of women in the gaming community (Cassell & Jenkins 2000; Kowert, Breuer & Quandt 2017; Eklund 2016; Vermeulen & Van Looy 2016), this research want to include those often neglected female gamers' experiences into the broader discussion of female gamer communities, and to see if there will be any difference between self-identified "hardcore gamers" or "casual gamers" concerning their reactions to sexism and misogyny in gaming.

Rationale of interview questions

The recruitment post and interview questions were clear about this research's intention in studying sexism and misogyny experienced by female gamers. However, interview questions were deliberately vague about scenarios in which female gamers encounter sexism and misogyny, forms of sexism and misogyny they have experienced, and their daily routines as gamers, in order to encourage a high degree of diversity and flexibility among participants' rumination on related experiences. For example, instead of asking "have you been sexually harassed during game play?", this research invites participants to recall "is there anything that makes you uncomfortable, confused, or offended as a woman who plays video games?" or "tell me about your daily life as a gamer" as the start of the whole conversation. There is also no strict qualification of a gamer identity (Cote 2015) for this research that aims to collect a more inclusive sample of female gamers. Anyone who identifies as a female playing any type of video games from time to time is eligible for participation.

Participant characteristics

Participants ranged in age from 16 to 63, which is surprisingly diverse for this research with a rather limited sample size (n=41). The average age is slightly over 26, which is younger than the overall demographic data of gamers aged 34 on average (Yanev 2023). This gap would most likely be attributed to the bias brought by snowball sampling, as I am in my early twenties. There are 10 English-speaking participants, and 31 who used Chinese for the interview. Participants are scattered across the world. Most of them live in China (n=19) and

in North America (n=14). The rest were also found in European countries (n=5) and Asia-Pacific countries (n=3). Almost all participants have finished their higher education and hold at least a bachelor degree. One participant holds a certificate from a vocational university, and the youngest participant is currently in high-school. The distribution of participants' occupations is especially wide, including school teachers, fashion designer, civil servant, marketing manager, aircraft engineer, dentist, social worker, business analyst, etc., which directly challenges the "geeky" stereotype of gamers clustering within STEM areas. Among all participants, three of them are currently working in the gaming industry, and three others have past working experiences, which allows them to give opinions as both consumers and producers of video games, adding richness to the data.

Ethical concerns

The only participant below 18 years old was introduced to my research project by her teacher at a boarding school located in China. Her voluntary participation was treated with special caution, since her legal guardian was not actively fulfilling the parental duty at the time of this research, and left her daily life to the large responsibility of the boarding school. Interview questions were sent to her teacher beforehand for removing any inappropriate questions. Regarding situations of sexual harassment mentioned by her during the interview, I notified her teacher of the danger she was facing upon her consent, in accordance with requirements made by the mandatory reporting system for child abuse in China. I also shared with her contact information of support centers to which she may reach out, in case she needs external assistance.

Data analysis

Transcripted interview data was transferred to MAXQDA, a qualitative analysis software. A grounded theory approach is applied for this research (Glaser & Strauss 2017 [1967]; Charmaz 2006), which allows researchers to recognize patterns directly from the first-hand information provided by participants, avoiding potential bias of interpretation based on established theories or analytical frameworks. This approach also matches well with the deliberately vague interview questions that encourage participants to freely express themselves. Three major coping strategies are identified through this method, which are "run" (quitting multi-player games or avoid playing with strangers), "hide" (creating gender-neutral user profiles or avoid revealing one's feminine voice), and "fight" (protesting but with careful calculation with its social cost).

5. Analysis and findings

5.1 Patterns of sexism and misogyny in gaming observed from interviews

Participants identified three main sources of sexism and misogyny perceived by them in their gaming experiences: the gaming content itself, other gamers during game play, and the broader gaming community. While the previous two sources have been heavily studied, the last identified source has been rarely mentioned by existing literature, as compared to the other two sources, it is an *indirect* experience of gaming. Without being targeted as a person or looking at a video game that one *chooses* to open, the sexist and misogynistic atmosphere of the community itself also appears to discourage female gamers. Despite that the discomfort brought by the atmosphere is less intense, its omnipresence is far more infiltrative. Resembling what Bourdieu characterizes as the "symbolic violence" (Bourdieu 2001), the sexist and misogynistic atmosphere of the gaming community is perceived by every participant in this research, and it affects the development of all three coping mechanisms, and especially with mentalities behind the first two.

Gaming content

Most female gamers who participated in this research are frustrated by the hypersexualization of female characters' design. While a few participants disagree with the hypersexualization from the moral perspective, criticizing them for being inappropriate to design such pornographic representations of women and young girls in cultural products that are marketed to the general public, the majority of participants raised two main points of discontent towards such character design: the strong influence of male gaze on female characters' designs, and the lack of resemblance between female characters in game and women in real life. The second point is particularly stressed when this lack of resemblance is found in games targeting the female audience.

> I recently bumped into a new mobile game called *Nikke*. I was told that this game merged FPS [first person shooting] with strategy, which sounds quite innovative, and people said it got a huge budgement spent on its arts [of game characters], hiring well-known top-tier artists and stuff. The moment I saw the arts they referred to in the game, I felt super disgusted. Like…I know men are obsessed with women's butts, but this just went too far. You know at first sight who their target customers are: horny teenagers imagining having a harem of anime girls. (Wendy)

The game *Goddess of Victory: Nikke* mentioned above by Wendy was a mobile game developed by a South Korean studio, Shift Up, in 2022. Players can deploy up to five different female characters holding different types of guns on the battlefield, and watch them firing at enemies with a squatting position from behind. As their rifles pour out bullets, the strong recoil force makes bodies of these "goddesses of victory" incessantly quiver. Emphasizing on the vivid visualization of those intensely quivering breasts and hips, players are essentially

watching these female characters twerking behind the screen. Although there is no connection between the twerking hip and the game mechanics, this strikingly image of sexy young girls shaking their curvy bodies still enjoys rather high-quality 3D modeling and animation, making it the absolute visual focus on the gaming interface. Despite controversies over its carnal art style, *Nikke* has received warm welcome among male gamers in East Asia. There are gaming youtubers making video about tips for making the twerking even smoother, as well as video that rank the visual effects of twerking across all female characters, serving as perfect examples of the incredible persistence of male gaze rooted in the media of video games (Haozi 2022; Alai Gaming 2022).

Figure 4 & 5. Screenshots of *Nikke* character designs. Source: https://nikke-en.com/

Figure 6. Compilation of female characters' shooting poses in *Nikke* from a "best butt" ranking post on PTT (a Taiwanese online forum). Source: https://ptt.reviews/C_Chat/M.1668434927.A.522

The specific intention of revealing female body parts for the voyeuristic pleasure of the heterosexual male audience is even more pronounced in games that allow players to choose between female and male avatars, in which the female version is displayed in a more sexualized fashion.

> I play through the *Assassin's Creed* series. Back in the early days, you didn't really have an option other than the default male avatar. But you know their recent work, *Odyssey,* right? It's the first in this series that you can play with a female avatar! And you can even have sex with the same sex, or develop a homosexual relationship with NPCs [non-playable characters]! I was so excited that I actually played it for more than one time. I tried with both male and female avatars to get the full experience. (Pixxy)

Like Pixxy said, *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* was a refreshing twist for this popular RPG (role play games) series produced by the French gaming powerhouse, Ubisoft, in 2018. Players can either play as the female protagonist, Kassandra, or the male protagonist, Alexios. Situated in ancient Greece, the game boldly added the possibility of homosexuality upon players' choice, which triggered heated discussion within the gaming community. However, Pixxy continued with:

> You need to constantly control your avatar carefully, or they will fall off the road or fall into water. I noticed that animations were different for male avatar and female avatar falling over themselves. For the female one, her position allows you to see her underwear from a certain angle. But that's not the case with the male version. I can't believe that they actually made this difference. They put money, time, [and] human efforts into a tiny underwear detail in this huge production. (Pixxy)

The intentional detail of highlighting the underwear worn by a female avatar is a backlash against the game's attempt in breaking the longstanding assumption that video games are designed to satisfy the heterosexual male audience. Despite that almost all participants complained about the ubiquitous hypersexualization with female characters' appearances, such as extravagantly big "boobs" and scantily clad bodies, the case with *Odyssey* was particularly interesting, as Pixxy mentioned that the revealed underwear on the fallen Kassandra was a programmed scene resulted from players' actions. It thus implies the possibility for players to let her fall over on purpose, even time after time, in order to watch the underwear detail, which resonates with what Galloway (2006) and Bogost (2010) argue about the "algorithmic game" that indexes players' behaviors, and reinforces certain perceptions of reality through repetitive feedback in an immersive virtual environment, as well as what Jennings (2018) warns about the further strengthening of the male spectator's agentic status of control in video games.

The second type of complaint about the gendered gaming content centers around the representation of female characters being too deviant from common sense and real women in life, or unrelatable in general. Here participants commented on not just physical appearances of female characters, but also on their personalities and relationships with other characters in games.

> "Sometimes it's not even about wearing sexy clothes. Sometimes their outfits are just surreal, like wearing bikinis in freezing weather, or wearing extremely high heels when she is doing close combat in an action game." (Chubby Doggo)

> "I have never played a game featuring an aged female protagonist. There are quite a few games with aged male leads, like Geralt in *The Witcher 3*. I have some aged female characters in mind, but they are side characters. And usually, you can't tell they are aged from their looks. Women in games still have perfect skin and body-shape in their thirties or forties." (Shiki)

Chubby Doggo and Shiki's observations with fantasized feminine beauty again confirm the importance of being visually pleasing for designing female characters that caters to the male gaze in video games. However, as the female gamer population continues to grow steadily in recent years, game development studios also try to attract this new and huge market with tailored content, which echoes with the logic of distinguishing gaming content favored by boys and that by girls, and therefore promoting girl-friendly content, in early research on gendered gaming (Cassell & Jenkins 2000; Graner-Ray 2004). A note-worthy genre of these female-targeted games is the so-called "otome" game, in which "otome" means "teenage girl" in Japanese. A typical otome game features a female protagonist controlled by the player and her love story with several male characters. Players select one option among a group of preset responses to various events as the story progresses. Different choices lead to different storylines, and finally, the player's path through this decision-tree decides which "prince charming" the female lead will end up with. Japanese studios have been producing otome games since the 1990s, while since the late 2010s, gaming companies in mainland China have also started releasing these games (Tian 2022). Although otome game was not a popular genre mentioned among my participants, the small group of participants who mentioned their experiences with this genre have simultaneously criticized the personalities of female protagonists across a variety of otome games being repetitive and stereotyped.

> "They are all sweet, gentle, and caring. They look cute instead of sexy. They are good at cooking, usually, sharing home-made biscuits and bento with boys. They want the best for their boyfriends, but not themselves. They feel sacrificing for love is something they should do. Oh and there's always one boyfriend-candidate who acts like her daddy, lecturing her all the time. You just basically copy paste, with minor alterations." (Yummy)

What Yummy described here falls largely into the "virgin" category of a binary imagination of women in gaming (Fox & Bailenson 2009). Those who have played otome games complained that this cliché template of character design has little to do with how women really think and act in real-life relationships, and thus makes it impossible for them to emphasize with these female protagonists. This explicit denial of self-representation in game avatars contradicts earlier studies that suggest female gamers show a higher chance of internalizing sexist and misogynist beliefs after exposure to such gaming content (Dill & Thill 2007; Fox, Bailenson & Tricase 2013). The phenomenon that "an individual's behavior conforms to their digital self-representation independent of how others perceive them" (Yee &Bailenson 2007: 271),

the Proteus effect, in this research seems to be countered by the low level of empathy and thus identification with female characters in games, which could be possibly explained by the buffering effect of pre-existing thoughtful and realistic perceptions of the female gender in the internalization of misogyny through video game exposure found in recent research (McCullough, Wong & Stevenson 2020).

Male players met in online multi-player games

The second major source of sexism and misogyny perceived by female gamers is the interaction with male gamers in online multi-player games. Participants reported three major patterns of sexism and misogyny from male players: verbal abuse using gendered epithets, being seen as sexual resources for male gamers, and discrediting female gamers' gaming skills and experiences.

The first category of verbal abuse is often discussed by participants with a comparatively low level of assurance. As trash talking is so widespread in almost all types of multi-player games that allow communication between players to the point that it has been accepted as a norm within the gaming community (Beres et al. 2021; Hilvert-Bruce & Neill 2020), and swear words that involve gendered references, such as bitch, cunt, and pussy, are also commonly seen in colloquial languages outside gaming, a lot of participants could not determine whether they were abused because they were playing poorly, or they got abused specifically for their female gender. Contrary to my expectations, only a few participants confirmed that they faced foul language directed at them exactly because of their gender.

> "I was in the lobby with other team members. My mic was on, so they knew I was a girl for my voice. There was this one guy who said 'we have a muren here'. That was obviously sexist. There was no other way he would use that word." (Marble)

The example of Marble with the Chinese slang "mu ren 母人" is a context-sensitive case. The word translates literally to "female human", but the character "母 mu" as a gender pronoun is reserved for female animals in Chinese. Bridging the two characters, this slang suggests the dehumanization of a woman being called by it. Other similar examples mentioned by participants include pronouncing "gamer girl" or "e-girl" with a very strange tone, as well as commonly seen misogynistic swear words like "bitch","hoe", etc. However, participants described their related experiences with a strong sense of ambivalence.

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

> "I know this [the assumption that female gamers always pick supporter roles in competitive gaming] is discrimination, strictly speaking. But this impression is so widespread that everyone just refers to it without thinking. You can't say that he was targeting me specifically for my gender. I am not

really a feminist, and I don't like making things all about gender."
(Lancaster)

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

The prevalence of toxicity in gaming and the normalized use of misogynistic epithets have led to constant self-doubt over the legitimacy of their discontent, the reluctance to voice out their feelings among female gamers, and even denial of their feelings among participants. Very few existing studies have touched on self-doubt or even self-blame as a reaction towards sexism and misogyny in gaming (Fox & Tang 2017; Janish 2018). However, on the other hand, the phenomenon that some participants emphasized their efforts in not "making things all about gender" also demonstrates that they were very much aware of the gendered nature of their gaming experiences.

The second category of being seen as sexual resources in the male-dominated gaming community includes a variety of conducts from male gamers. Different forms of sexual harassment are mentioned by the majority of gamers, ranging from randomly sending "such my dick…I wanna lick your pussy" (Oliana), "I want to fuck you" (Rain), or "I got big dick" (Sapphire) shortly after adding each other as friends on the gaming platform, to deeply disturbing rape attempts in virtual environments mentioned by Eggplant and Hawk:

"I was in VR gaming, and a guy just ran into my [avatar] face. He glued his avatar to my avatar, and started talking creepy rape shits for non-stop. I was terrified. I have never experienced something like this. I didn't expect it. It felt so real. You see this guy hugging you and you hear his voice. I just froze and couldn't do anything for a short while, then I just cut the power [of my device] entirely to get out of the situation." (Eggplant)

"There was this guy approaching me in *Fallout 76*. He stuck his avatar to mine, and he mimicked movements of sexual intercourse with his avatar. He was trying to rape me! It was nasty. I told him to stop in the chat, again and again, but he ignored me." (Hawk)

Apart from explicit sexual harassment, participants also talked about more subtle expressions of treating them as sexual resources instead of human, such as sending unsolicited relationship requests or requiring a newly joined female member of a game discussion group chat to "send us your selfie or you won't be approved by your bros here" (Danny). Young, a veteran female player whose gaming skills is recognized by male players around her, shared two situations in which she felt being treated like a sexual object, but understood the intention of men who treated her that way was to appreciate her gaming competence.

"One day a man whom I played with for a while added me to a group chat of 'esports escorts'. I was so offended. Because on the surface, esports escorts are advanced female gamers who are paid to play with male players, but the reputation of this title is so infamous. Borderline prostitution,

everyone knows. I exited the group chat immediately and made it clear to that man that please don't add me to these groups again but still, thank you for your appreciation. " (Young)

"Some of my male friends in real life suggested that I should be a streamer. I am not that good in fact. They recommend me because I can sell my e-girl profile and 'make money from silly teenage boys'. I know they are not serious, but I still feel really uncomfortable for being linked to soft porn." (Young)

The difference between what Eggplant and Hawk described as undoubtedly malicious sexual assault, and what Young shared as the sexualization of her "out of good purpose" keeps appearing in participants' narrations of their experiences and related thoughts. Their conscious deliberation of the distinction between hostile and benevolent sexism (malicious vs. unintentional/well-intentioned) serves as a crucial step before they decide to react in certain ways, which will be discussed further in the "fight" section below.

The third category of discrediting female participation in games is most frequently mentioned among participants. The shared logic of most incidents fallen into this category is to assume that female gamers are bad gamers, while the expression of such contempt is highly diverse. One behavioral pattern observed by many participants is male gamers' sense of entitlement to the "commander" status in team play, when they know there exists female gamer on the same side. For example, in MOBA (multi-player battle arena) games like *League of Legends* and *Honor of Kings*, which are popular choices among participants, participants noticed that men like to give very detailed instructions to them, and expect them to obey faithfully. Sometimes, experienced female gamers feel offended for being treated like a novice.

"I played a lot of *Honor of Kings* with my female friends. There was this time when one of them brought her boyfriend to our team. Me and other friends don't really know this guy, but since he was someone's boyfriend, it's ok to play together. However, this guy had no problem giving orders to everyone during the game. Telling you to do this and that. Spamming in the chat. It was super annoying. And also embarrassing, because he was making wrong decisions. I wonder where his confidence came from as he was ranked below me. I was a Challenger then [the highest rank of competitive gaming]." (Coconut)

Another common trait of discrediting female gamers' gaming skills and experiences is to assign them to supporter roles, or to assume them playing supporter roles, as supporters are widely understood as easier to play and less important in a team across multi-player games (Ruotsalainen & Friman 2018). Participants also mentioned some specific game characters designed to be "newbie-friendly" in different games, which have been stigmatized as female gamers' go-to picks, and male gamers often assume those who play these characters to be female. "I remember in one game, one of our teammates picked Yuumi [a character supposedly favored by female gamers in *League of Legends*], and she was really good. We won the game, and one guy on the other side just snapped, typing nonsense like 'e-girl yuumi

so brainless' in the chat. As he was not in our team, he couldn't be sure about that yuumi's gender, but he still went for it" (Olive).

The last common pattern of discrediting female gamers mentioned by quite a few participants is similar to the "well-intentioned" sexualization of female gamers discussed above, which is for male gamers to address the team with: "it is ok if we lose, since we have a girl here" (Bass). Some participants understood it as an attempt in being supportive and understanding, but they, as well as others who did not appreciate this gesture, also saw it as condescending. Participants reported this kind of behavior both before the game and after a lost game. Although the bitterness of losing is sugar-coated with a "guys, relax and just have some fun" (Swan) attitude, participants pointed out that the core of this discourse was still automatically blaming the female gamer as the culprit of failure, and the deeply rooted stereotype of female gamers being incompetent. However, many participants complained that they could not protest against this type of patronizing actions because of its seemingly "good-faith". They worried about triggering potential personal attacks if they would have stood out for themselves, and thus chose to accept the semblance of peace. This coping strategy will also be further discussed in the "fight" section.

The broader gaming community

When being asked about their gendered gaming experiences, instead of in-game experiences, many participants drew from experiences outside their game play, signifying the substantial influence brought by the socialization of gaming culture on individual gamers. A general division among participants of this research is whether they started gaming since their childhood, or only after they have relatively grown up. Those who reported for starting late, such as during high school or college, frequently mentioned their experiences of watching male classmates gathering up and playing video games, or talking about them. Even though some participants said that they were curious about gaming at that time, they thought of it as toys for boys. The perceived link between masculinity and gaming is particularly strong regarding competitive gaming, as it involves "a lot of killing and fighting, which are not for good girls according to…parents" (Anne). The gender segregation of gaming in childhood mentioned by quite a few of participants is closely linked to the notion of geek masculinity discussed in the literature review, and the emphasis on the discrepancy between traditional femininity, competitiveness, and aggression also conforms to early studies that noticed gender differences in video games play style (Lucas & Sherry 2004; King, Miles & Kniska 1991; Hartmann & Klimt 2006).

All participants reported that they regularly checked out online gaming forums, social media platforms, and video sharing platforms for gaming news, game play guides, and other gaming related information. Most of them commented that sexism and misogyny could be found everywhere in those online spaces, such as making sexual jokes about female characters in games and female public figures in the industry, judging other female gamers' skills, and gatekeeping. One example of gatekeeping was brought up by quite a few Chinese-speaking participants. The incident was centered around *Black Myth: Wukong*, an upcoming Chinese triple-A production. The producer of this hyped game posted several dirty jokes on social

media to promote the game's trailer, including that he had been "licked so much that [he] could no longer get erected" as well as "now I feel pressure in my pants [after watching the trailer]!", which led to a boycott of the game initiated by Chinese female gamers (Nesterenko 2020). Revealing deeply rooted sexualization of women in the Chinese gaming industry, the conflict was further intensified as male supporters of *Black Myth: Wukong* also united under the slogan "triple-A games do not need female players" (Kit 2022). Witnessing this gatekeeping movement spreading across Chinese gaming communities, many participants noted that it has further entrenched the stereotype that female gamers are not target customers of "hard-core" games, leading to more skepticism towards female gamers who dared to reveal themselves in those communities and share their opinions on "hard-core" triple-A productions. One of them told me:

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

Mousse's take-away at the end of her comment was alarming for this whole research. She decided to make herself invisible to male gamers not because she herself was attacked, harassed, or judged by male gamers, but because she witnessed others being treated like that. The indirect exposure to sexism and misogyny in gaming discourages female participation just like direct exposure to them, which conforms to what earlier studies on female's use of physical public spaces had found: they constrain their behaviors in public spaces, or limit their entrance into public spaces, fearing that harassment or other forms of gender-based abuse might occur (Valentine 1989; Gardner 1995). More importantly, an individual female gamer may succeed in avoiding sexism and misogyny targeting her as a person throughout her gaming career, but it is unlikely for her to quarantine herself completely from the sexist and misogynistic gaming culture that infiltrates highly diverse gaming-related scenarios in contemporary digital society. Resembling what Bourdieu coined as "symbolic violence" in the masculine dominance of our society (Bourdieu 2001), this effective intimidation of the female population in digital spaces (Sobieraj 2018) and the two coping strategies–"run" and "hide"–shaped by it will be discussed in the next section.

5.2 "Run": avoiding multi-player online games and strangers

The well-known "run, hide, fight" principle for protecting oneself in firearms-based terrorist attack (FBI 2020) emerged in my head as I was on the process of interviewing female gamers, which surprisingly, as well as ironically, matches well with their three major coping strategies

for sexism and misogyny in gaming. The "run" principle in its original context means to immediately escape from the location under attack, or to stay away from the attacker. In the context of this research, the "run" strategy involves either quitting multi-player online games entirely, or avoiding playing with strangers, which are both found in previous studies on female gamers' reactions to gender-based abuse in online gaming (Cote 2015; McLean & Griffiths 2019; Bergstrom 2019; Fox & Tang 2017).

Among participants who reported taking "running" from unknown male players as their major coping strategy, the concept of "risk" was frequently visited in their narrations: they were aware of potential dangers brought by interacting with unknown male gamers, a compromised situation in itself. Participants who either shifted to single-player games or only played multi-player online games with friends in real life and carefully selected gaming-partners met online characterized their solutions as prevention instead of reaction. They often emphasized on the pragmatic consideration behind this strategy, as they saw dealing with *ad hominem* attack and harassment in gaming as in vain, exhaustive, or running counter to the goals of having fun and relaxing.

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

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

> "Real life is hard enough. I play games to take a break, not to deal with those shits again after work." (Aspen)

While those who chose to stick with their friends and stay away from strangers in online gaming did not implement a complete retreat from online gaming, some of those who voluntarily exiled themselves from the online gaming world had never tried multi-player online games at the very start (Bergstrom 2019). This is a major difference observed between female gamers who had unpleasant personal experiences with online gaming before, and those who sensed the hostile atmosphere and decided to circumvent this virtual "minefield", like what Mousse had learned from her search for a *Monster Hunter* guide. However, existing studies on women's experiences with online gaming generally focus on specific forms of sexism and misogyny in gaming, such as being criticized for a lack of gaming skills (Ruvalcaba et al. 2018; Kelly et al. 2023), stigmatization of female players (Taylor, Jenson & de Castell 2009), assigning female players into stereotypical gender roles in game play (Ivory et al. 2014), as well as sexual harassment (Fox & Tang 2017; Tang & Fox 2016; Tang et al. 2020) and other more palpable and visible expressions of hostility towards female gamers. Driving out female gamers from online gaming, the indirect intimidation effect does not work through personal experiences is largely overlooked by the established literature.

As noted in the previous section, this indirect intimidation is often perceived by female gamers through their participation in the broader gaming community. Studying #Gamergate, one of the most influential events of the gaming world, Gray, Buyukozturk, and Hill (2017) propose to understand #Gamergate's impact on lived experiences of women in the gaming industry through Bourdieu's conceptualization of "symbolic violence". Observing that violent attacks on female public figures in gaming, such as Anita Sarkeesian and Briana Wu, have normalized the aggression and discrimination towards women in this industry, Gray and her colleagues argue that #Gamergate essentially maintains the patriarchal power structure within the gaming community through manifestations of non-physical violence, in which Bourdieun concept of "how order and restraint are established and maintained through indirect mechanisms as opposed to direct or coercive control" (Gray, Buyukozturk & Hill 2017: 4) appears particularly insightful. Elaborating on the reproduction of dominance on an oppressed social group by a privileged group, Bourdieu argues that the legitimation of such dominance is built on the foundation of the subordinate group's unconscious acceptance, or misrecognition, which preserves and reinforces the imbalance power dynamics (Bourdieu 2001; Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). Challenging Bourdieu on the unconscious acceptance of symbolic violence, or the failure to perceive its coercive nature, Gray and her colleagues (2017; Buyukozturk 2022) contend that female gamers do acknowledge the symbolic violence targeting them, but normalize the gender hierarchy as a part of the gaming culture. However, what this research has found among participants further suggests that female gamers do not automatically normalize their gendered gaming experiences, as they tend to normalize "day-to-day" sexism and misogyny in gaming especially when they recognize them as unintentional or well-intentioned, protest against what they perceive as malicious, and grudgingly accept the status-quo when they expect futile efforts of subversion, which will be discussed in the "fight" section.

5.3 "Hide": concealing the female identity

Continuing with the "run" strategy, the "hide" strategy is also strongly influenced by the symbolic violence towards women prevalent in the gaming community. Participants who chose this strategy were in general highly attracted by the content offered by various multi-player online games, but still want to prevent being targeted personally by unknown male gamers. This pragmatic logic of "run" has been extended to the "hide" strategy by participants: "if no one recognizes you as a girl, no one will give you a hard time for being a girl" (Casa). Common measures for concealing one's female identity include using gender-neutral IDs and profile pictures, refraining from joining voice chat with strangers, using a voice changer, and trying not to use feminine language or simulating a masculine tone in chat, which also conforms to previous findings about women's responses to sexism and misogyny in gaming (Cote 2015; Fox & Tang 2017). Among them, muting oneself or only joining voice chats with friends is most frequently mentioned. As one's voice determined by biological features is probably the most reliable gender cue among others in gaming, Kuznekoff and Rose (2013) have found that a female voice is three times more likely to receive negative feedback than a male voice in their experiment, where pre-recorded clips of either a man or woman speaking were played in the voice chat.

In their discussion of the fake girl gamer "Ellie" in the professional *Overwatch* community, mentioned in the literature review on female representation in gaming, Friman and Ruotsalainen (2022) point out that the whole farce of a man pretending to be a female gamer and thus triggering a storm of harassment and flaming of this soon-to-be "female pro-gamer" tells the essence of gender representation in gaming, which is what Judith Butler conceptualizes as the performance of gender (Butler 1990). Rather than defined by a fixed set of attributes, Butler sees gender identity, as well as all identities, as fluid and being performed through daily repetitions of gendered acts understood by different cultural settings. According to Butler (1990), gender is a performance at the fundamental level. Among participants who tried to conceal their femininity, a few of them mentioned that women and men phrased their words in different ways, which could be best understood as the performance of gender through speech.

> "Sometimes I could tell that there was a girl under a gender-neutral ID. The way she talked gave her away. It's hard to describe it clearly, but if you are a girl, and you see someone talking like that [in chat], you just know. Like using some emojis, cute modal particles…and stuff like that." (Soupe)

> "Women in general are more polite. Men don't think that much about how they may sound to others, especially in games. You don't need to mind your manners anymore when no one knows who you are. There's no consequence. I noticed that men use imperative sentences a lot when both talking and typing in chats." (Eclipse)

Talking in a gendered way is a performance of gender, while actively looking for gender cues that make a male or a female person recognizable connects to what Butler characterizes as the precarity of identity (Butler 2009; Shaw 2013). Performativity and precarity of identity are two sides of the same coin. As there is no official ending of the performance of any identity, where its construction becomes finally achieved and confirmed, once and for all, the constant uncertainty of whether one's performance can be "read or understood…on the far side of established modes of intelligibility" (Butler 2009: iv) constitutes what Butler calls as the precarity of identity. Living the digital life in immersive virtual environments, the uncertainty of being recognizable is further amplified. One's digital self-representation appears as what Donna Haraway (2016 [1985]) imagined as the "cyborg" that denies all socially imposed boundaries among identities defined by their physicalities. In video games, players who craft their digital-selves either through customizable avatars or designed combinations of their IDs, voices, play styles, and other signals, allowing themselves to transgress their offline identities, are essentially cyborgs (Kennedy 2006). Very few participants shared their experiences with manipulating their gender performances in gaming on purpose. Among them, Goat had what Erving Goffman (1956) may call a dramaturgical revelation with her gender-swapping story:

> "Once I was trying out a game using my boyfriend's account. I was pretty bad as a starter, and of course, people started to throw all kinds of horrible things at me [in chat]. Somehow I just suddenly came up with this idea to type something like 'sorry dudes this is my girlfriend playing'. They stopped immediately, and started joking about girls can't play and stuff, showing that kind of bonding moment among frats. At that moment I

realized that men are in fact easy to manipulate. Their minds are so simple. Transparent, even. Once you know their scripts, you can also be a misogynistic straight man online." (Goat)

While male gamers are constantly looking for gender cues to "anchor" female gamers at their oppressed positions, they are also actively "broadcasting" their masculine gender performances to others for recognition, hoping to overcome the precarity of gender in digital spaces, although unconsciously in most situations. Sapphire shared her creative story of exploiting heterosexual men's perpetual need to prove their heterosexuality:

"I got a somewhat feminine ID in *League of Legends*. I thought it was gender-neutral when I decided it, but obviously not neutral enough in their [men's] eyes. I receive messages like 'are you single?' from time to time. At first I still tried to tell them I'm not interested. But you know, not really working. Now I will first ignore [the message], and if someone keeps sending it, I will reply 'are you gay?'. It shuts them up every time. I definitely recommend it." (Sapphire)

Although Goat and Sapphire's gender-swapping strategies are not only isolated cases in this research but also rarely seen in the existing literature on women's responses towards sexism and misogyny in gaming (Hussain & Griffith 2008), with their precedents, it could be inspiring for future researchers to further investigate reasons behind gender-swapping for female gamers and its impact on their gaming experiences.

5.4 "Fight": carefully calculating the social cost of protesting

In the original anti-terrorist context of "run, hide, fight", there is a priority among the three principles, in which "fight" is emphasized as the last option. In the context of this research, although there does not exist a consensus over the priority between "run" and "hide" among participants, the "fight" strategy is mentioned by almost everyone as a last resort. Sensing the symbolic violence brought by male dominance of the gaming community, female gamers are keenly aware of the price they may have to pay for being "feminist killjoys" who seek to challenge the gender hierarchy in gaming (Salter & Blodgett 2012; Braithwaite 2014). Bearing possible futility of protesting efforts and retaliation from men in mind, female gamers carefully calculate the social cost and expected turnover of standing out for themselves against sexism and misogyny in gaming.

From conversations with participants who reported any form of protest against their gendered gaming experiences, there emerge two main groups of questions they would ask themselves before taking actions. The first group questions the interpersonal relationship between the participant and the male gamer, while the second group questions the purpose of the male gamer.

1. Do we know each other in real life? Is there a need for me to get along with him? Are we close enough for me to "be real"? Can I afford to offend him?
2. Is this (the sexist or misogynistic act) malicious or intentional? Is this out of good faith?

Although many participants prefer to avoid playing with strangers in the first place, as they either resolved to "run" or "hide", those who decided to stay in online gaming with strangers also reported that they found it most easy to protest when confronting strangers. Apart from technical solutions such as muting or blocking the person, most of them admitted that they had regularly reported strangers with in-game report systems. However, many of them still saw the report system not as their first choice, as many complained about its ineffectiveness. The inconsistency of moderation policies across gaming platforms appears as a major concern. For example, "games usually ask you to select reasons [for filing a report] with ticking boxes from a list, but [while] some games have a box for sexism, some games don't, [so] you can only choose 'verbal abuse' or 'disrespectful language', which is tricky because only straight-forward foul language will be accepted [as valid reason for report] under this category" (Tequila). The lack of mandatory requirement for gaming platforms to send feedback to reports also discourages female gamers, as they felt that their reports had not been taken seriously. Some participants also commented that even though gaming platforms do punish toxic players, the penalty is usually a short period of ban (from playing).

> "Permanent ban is really unlikely to happen. These gaming platforms want
> to retain as many players as possible for business, so why push them away?
> They lack the motivation to really do something with toxicity." (Mars)

Furthermore, as the majority of gaming platforms do not require real-name authentication for creating an account, an account is always disposable in case of a permanent ban.[5] Several participants expressed their worries about vindictive actions from male gamers whom they reported. Although gaming platforms will not give away user information of the reporter, those who get reported can still search through their match history and locate a few possible accounts that could have reported him or her on that day. In case of fierce quarrels or similar escalated situations, it will be even easier to find the target and take revenge, such as continuous harassment and online stalking reported by a few participants.

The decision to "fight" or not becomes more difficult when the situation involves male gamers one knows in real life, because "you need to evaluate whether you will meet him again or not" (Totoro). Unfortunately, this has also appeared to be a problem for those who chose to stick with their friends in online gaming. Although the ideal situation is to only play with friends in online gaming, many participants admitted that it was difficult to achieve this goal, simply because it was difficult to find a time that suited everyone's schedules. Thus, the more common situation for those who want to stay with their friends is to play in a team that includes both friends and strangers. Conforming to what Amanda Cote (2015) has observed from female gamers in this kind of social setting, participants agreed that being surrounded by friends, even not entirely by friends, encouraged them to voice out their frustration when they encountered sexism or misogyny during game play. "I know I won't be besieged for standing out…I can feel my backbone with two or three friends!" (Coconut). However, despite that she feels empowered by the presence of friends, Coconut's earlier quote about an annoying game with one of her friends' boyfriend serves as a typical example of an awkward situation when friends and strangers both appear, in which female gamers find themselves playing with "friends of friends". Even though these "friends of friends" were strangers to them, all participants who reported experiences with this situation admitted that they had to treat them

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[5] Real-name authentication has been a mandatory requirement for most Chinese online platforms that allow users to generate content since 2016.

with proper social etiquette and to bear with them in case of being offended by their sexist or misogynistic conducts.

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

The story recited by Olive demonstrates that concerns over long-term and close (not necessarily intimate) interpersonal relationships could be obstacles for women to express their true feelings. However, some participants who have experiences of being offended by friends in real life offered counter-examples, asserting that "I can say what I want because we are close enough, and I know he is not that kind of person" (Wendy) or "I don't see the point of being diplomatic with your friends. If you are truly friends, you should be real, or you just have fake friends" (Bass). Based on examples in this research, the mediating role of friendship and intimate relationship appears to be ambiguous in the relationship between female gamers' reaction to gendered gaming experiences and the social setting of such experiences, which requires further research on this topic.

However, while friendship and romantic relationships are more equal relationships, interpersonal relationships that involve pre-existing social hierarchies further discourage participants from confronting sexism and misogyny in gaming. In this research, the experience of "can't afford to offend" is most pronounced with those working in the gaming industry.

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

> "I was the only Asian and the only female in my department. Can you imagine the feeling of sitting in the meeting room everyday with five white guys? And one of them is my boss. I really need to think before I talk about anything in gaming." (Eggplant)

Jasmin and Eggplant's experiences suggest that social hierarchies and power relations in real life can be introduced into gaming scenes, and together with the gender hierarchy in gaming, they may reinforce each other, further adding difficulty for women who found themselves trapped in such intersections to protest.

Compared to the deliberation of interpersonal relationships, the second group of questions are much less complicated, as they aim at distinguishing between what commonly known as hostile sexism from benevolent sexism. While there are studies of psychological predictors of men's aggression towards women in gaming support that men understand this difference and

exercise it consicously (Chandler 2019; Jagayat & Choma 2021), this research finds that women also proactively contemplate on this difference, and adjust their responses accordingly.

Most participants said they would react immediately to what they perceived as malicious and intentional, even when they had to place themselves against people they know in real life, despite that the degree of seriousness they chose to convey in their objections may vary. Some participants commented that the purpose was simply "to let him know that someone disagrees with him" (Oliana), and they would nevertheless try to prevent the situation from escalating. Others stated that they would not compromise in case of being insulted, either directly calling out the person and demanding apology or throwing back swear words. However, with what they perceived as unintentional or well-intentioned expressions of sexism and misogyny in gaming, almost all participants agreed that they would not react, at least not on the spot, to male gamers who "don't mean to hurt" (Danny). One frequently mentioned example of benevolent sexism in gaming is male gamers offering to "carry you (as a burden but still beat the opponent team)" in competitive gaming. Participants unanimously agreed that this kind of modern "chivalry" made them feel very uncomfortable, but regarding their responses, many of them admitted that even though they always tried to not be "carried" in game play, they would not overtly turn down this offer and thus spoil the atmosphere, which might "accidentally injure someone who actually comes with good will" (Swan).

Normalization of certain expressions of sexism and misogyny, which were perceived as omnipresent in contemporary daily life by participants, is also observed in this research, although all participants were clear with their overall stances that sexism and misogyny in gaming are wrong and should not be taken as norms. This normalization was especially common regarding some of their reflections on sexual harassment in gaming. The longstanding stereotype of male gamers being socially awkward and having no clue with romantic relationships is widely accepted as fact by many participants who mentioned about receiving weird or offensive, but not exactly lewd, relationship requests.

> "A lot of male gamers are nerds. They don't know how to communicate with girls. After all, they are not charming boys…they act in that way because of the environment's influence. The general context of intersexual relationship in our society is like that. You can't really expect them to break from it." (Tequila)

Observations presented in the "fight" section need to be interpreted with caution. Quantitative studies on female gamers' decision-making mechanisms in response to sexism and misogyny in gaming, are needed for examining patterns emerged from these interviews. However, I would like to argue that two patterns appear more consistently than others: 1) female gamers are less likely to protest against people they know in real life; 2) female gamers are less likely to protest against what they understand as unintentional or well-intentioned sexism and misogyny. More importantly, participants' careful calculation of social cost based on their interpersonal relationships highlights that instead of being characterized solely as an "online activity", playing video games needs to be studied from its offline dimension as well, since online social interaction and offline social interaction are found constantly juxtaposed in gaming scenes. As existing social inequalities have already been found transmitted to and reproduced in cyberspace (Schradie 2011), further research should question how gender inequality in gaming and other forms of social inequalities may work together in shaping female gamers' gaming experiences.

Last but not least, as many participants mentioned about strangers being sources of hostile sexism and acquaintances being sources of benevolent sexism in most cases, a dilemma emerges: female gamers who chose to run away from strangers in gaming do largely succeed in avoiding random malicious attacks and harassment, but at the price of giving up presence in "public spaces" of gaming, accepting the status quo of a male-dominated gaming culture, and keeping their mouths shut when being offended by male gamers in their common social circles. This "trading place for peace" (Buyukozturk 2022) strategy resonates with what Schwalbe and his colleagues depict as the "trading power for patronage" logic for a subordinate group to adapt to its oppressed position in the generic process of reproducing inequalities (Schwalbe et al. 2000). However, among participants who showed awareness of this paradoxical situation, they stressed that they did not willingly seek "patronage" provided by male acquaintances, but rather had no better choice than to accept the compromised status-quo, as Hawk put it in a metaphor of partying together:

> "It's like partying together in a room. People are dancing and they are excited, not really paying attention to things around them. It's natural if someone just accidentally steps on your toe. Normally, when you say 'ouch! you just stepped on me', that guy will say something like 'I'm sorry! Are you alright? Do you need help?', and you say 'thank you, but nevermind. I'm fine', and it's over. But the situation here is: [when you complain about some man you know in life hurting your feelings through being sexist in gaming] he will be like 'why are you so butthurt?'. That is not normal. That is frustrating." (Hawk)

5.5 Looking for empathy and support from fellow female gamers

Hoping to observe collective actions taken by female gamers against sexism and misogyny in gaming, this study intentionally recruits participants from online gaming communities exclusively hosting female gamers. However, no clear patterns of collective agenda setting or collective action-taking has been observed, even among participants recruited from female-only forums and chat rooms.

Most participants do actively share their experiences, feelings, and thoughts about their gendered gaming experiences with fellow female gamers they either know in real life or have developed friendships with online. However, participants simultaneously characterized these communications as complaining or venting, in which they looked for empathy and emotional support, instead of developing constructive measures for improving female gamers' status in the gaming community. Like discussed in previous sections, avoiding playing with unknown male gamers and instead sticking with female friends are what could be counted as shared understanding among female gaming groups. "Our consensus is: don't play with men, and you don't get these shits" (Ravioli). Another less prominent measure mentioned by a few participants, which has been developed for the safety of other female gamers, is to disclose harasser's account information on publicly accessible gaming forums and social media platforms, usually through taking screenshots of the account's profile and disturbing messages sent by it. On one hand, this approach warns other female gamers about this creepy harasser, who they should avoid playing with, and on the other hand, it serves the purpose of

public-shaming, bringing a limited level of accountability to harassing and attacking women online (Jane 2016).

Female gamers expect empathy from other fellow gamers to create a sisterhood tied by their common struggle against sexism and misogyny. Due to this high level of expectation in comradeship, some participants expressed deep disappointment of meeting female gamers who catered to men's fantasy of "gamer girl", in order to benefit themselves. The contempt for those who sexualize themselves was commonly seen among participants who recalled the betrayed feeling of "being stabbed from the back" (Mars). Acting flirtatious and positively responding to men's suggestive jokes were commonly mentioned by participants as examples of self-sexualization. A more interesting example is the slang "rank-up bitch" mentioned by two Chinese-speaking gamers, similar to "halo hoe" (Taylor, Jenson & de Castell 2009) in the English context, describing female players who offer to be successful male gamers' girlfriends or sex-mates, in exchange for being "carried" in games and thus climbing up ranks in competitive gaming. Self-sexualization of self-objectification in assigning oneself to the role of a "rank-up bitch" was denounced without doubt, while it was further criticized for defaming the identity of female gamers.

> "They are why people perceive female gamers badly! They pretend to be gamers, but instead they are free riders of teammates' credits. They make the lives of actual female gamers so much harder. When they decide that they have had enough fun, they can just leave, and we have to deal with their reputation, trying to correct the image of female gamers." (Wendy)

Despite that female gamers and male gamers are often placed at opposite ends of each other, what Wendy implied in her criticism of "rank-up bitch" echoes with the persistent emphasis on a meritocratic "actual" gamer identity devotedly defended by the male-dominated gaming community (Paul 2018). While male gamers' relentless policing of the "real gamer" identity has been extensively studied, the possibility of female gamers' efforts in policing the "real girl gamer" identity, and the negotiation of such an identity within female gamer communities are yet to be discovered.

5.6 Limitations and directions of future research

Although this research has tried its best to map female gamers' understanding and coping strategies of sexism and misogyny in gaming, it has substantial limitations due to its methodology and collected data. Several findings of this research also suggest possible directions for more in-depth research in future.

The first limitation I would like to discuss is that this research heavily relies on interviewees' memories, as it encourages them to look at their gaming experiences from an overview perspective, and to share what they deem important to me. However, memories have often appeared to be clouded during interviews and many details were unfortunately lost, especially when participants traced back their experiences in childhood and adolescence. Even with more recent events, it is difficult for them to give out every detail. A possible solution with the loss of memory could be doing "game interviews", in which researchers watch participants playing games and interview them immediately after playing (Schott & Horrell

2000), or inviting participants to keep "gaming diaries" (Fox, Gilbert & Tang 2018) in a given period of time.

The second limitation of this study is brought by the strong sense of shame in repeating foul language about sex found among many participants. Participants troubled by this sense of shame tend to vaguely describe sexist and misogynistic verbal abuses directed at them, using phrases like "that kind of words" and "you know what I am talking about" a lot during interviews, which also leads to the loss of details in conversation data. As it is unethical for researchers to insist on a clear answer concerning traumatic experiences from interviewees, text-mining of publicly accessible posts in online gaming communities or recording in-game voice chats under strictly controlled experimental conditions could serve as possible future solutions (Kuznekoff & Rose 2013).

The third limitation of this study is its failure in recruiting more participants directly from female-only online gaming communities, which allows further examination of female gamers' intra-group interaction and thus comparison with their interactions with gamers from outside. Digital ethnography is commonly used for this purpose. However, given rejections of research requests I have received from these groups, it might be more practical for researchers to observe female gamer groups that formed through offline connections, which may alleviate their sense of vulnerability as a marginalized group of being closely watched by a stranger from the other end of the world.

Although I did not intend to focus solely on cisgender women, all participants of this study were cisgender women, which fails to include even more contested gender representation in the discussion of gendered gaming experiences. Since the vast majority of existing literature on women's experiences with gaming has not yet investigated possible challenges faced by transgender women and compared those to what concerns cisgender women either, future researchers can make a breakthrough in this direction.

As mentioned in the analysis of female gamers' deliberation of their interpersonal relationships in gaming, the juxtaposition of online and offline social interactions in gaming could be an important new dimension of studying socialization through gaming, as well as the reproduction of social hierarchies in gaming. Given that female gamers have developed detailed categorization for different kinds of interpersonal connections, as well as behavioral codes that guide their interactions with these connections correspondingly, social network analysis could be helpful in capturing generalizable models of their interactions with other gamers from various backgrounds.

In the end, I would like to call for further investigation of children and teenagers' gaming experiences. Almost all participants told me that they had only realized some of their earlier experiences being unaccounted for their sexist and misogynistic nature, or being unacceptable by their current standards, after they had grown up. Some of my participants also told stories of them being harassed by teenage boys instead of grown men. Minors are particularly vulnerable in cyberspace, especially in today's cyberspace filled with harmful online content, which demands effective measures in protecting minors online and guiding them with healthier consumption of online content. Understanding next generations' online experiences is the crucial first step for developing pertinent solutions to the problem, and thus concerning gaming, future researchers need to pay special attention to children and teenagers' consumption of gaming content and their social interactions with other actors in the broader gaming community.

6. Conclusion and policy recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

Through 41 in-depth interviews with female gamers from both Chinese-speaking gaming communities and those from English-speaking communities, this research questions female gamers' conceptualization of gendered gaming experiences, how they make sense of rampant sexism and misogyny in the gaming community, and what coping strategies have been deployed based on their answers to the previous two questions.

This research finds that participants, despite their distinct cultural and language backgrounds, shared the struggle of being a female gamer in a globalized industry of video games. The gendered gaming experience is not understood by female gamers as limited during game play, after one logs in into his or her gaming account, and launches a game. Instead, the gendered gaming experiences are perceived by female gamers from three dimensions: gaming content, interactions with male players in games, and the atmosphere of the broader gaming community. While the previous two sources of gendered gaming experiences exert direct impact on female gamers' perceptions of sexism and misogyny in gaming, the indirect intimidation exerted by the hostile atmosphere of the male-dominated gaming community significantly influences two of female gamers' main coping strategies, which are "run" (quitting multi-player online games or avoiding playing with strangers) and "hide" (concealing female identity cues). Protesting against sexism or misogyny in gaming on the spot is reserved as the last option of "fight". Female gamers carefully calculate the social cost of standing out for themselves along two dimensions, their interpersonal relationships with the offender, and the purpose of perceived offense, which invites further investigation on the juxtaposition of online and offline social interactions in gaming, as well as the reproduction of pre-existing social inequalities in gaming experiences.

6.2 Policy recommendations

As discussed in the literature review, sexism and misogyny in gaming are not developed within the gaming community, but are long-standing problems in the sexist and misogynist society, which got reflected by this particular aspect of popular digital culture. Thus, any fundamental change in the gaming industry requires fundamental changes of our society and our culture. However, there are still some practical measures that can be taken to make gaming safer and more inclusive for female players:

1. In the Digital Services Act, the EU promulgates extensive requirements for the standardization of built-in report systems across online platforms. Similar policy efforts should be taken by other countries, particularly in North America and East Asia, where major powerhouses in the gaming industry are located. There should be mandatory requirements for a certain level of consistency with content moderation policies and procedures adopted by different gaming platforms.

a. Sexism/Gender-based abuse/Misogyny should be set as an independent option when users are asked to submit reasons for filing a report of other players' toxic behaviors.

b. There should be a mandatory requirement for replying to a user's report of toxic behaviors of other players. Both receipt of the report and the decision made by the moderation team should be communicated clearly to the reporter within a reasonable amount of time (ex. five to ten working days).

c. Regarding manifestly illegal conducts, there should be a built-in API in the backstage of every gaming platform's report system, which allows the moderation team to notify legal authorities of the local regime at first sight (ex. within the first hour of receiving the report).

2. Governments should cooperate with schools to set up programs for educating children and teenagers about violence in digital spaces, which aim at raising awareness among children and teenagers, and enabling them to protect themselves from cyber-bullying and other forms of toxic online behaviors.

3. Government, universities, and gaming companies should cooperate in setting up fellowships and need-based financial aids specifically for girls studying gaming-related subjects in higher education, in order to encourage more female participation in the production side of the gaming industry.

4. Game development studios should be encouraged to produce gender-inclusive character designs and story plots. Government departments in charge of alleviating digital inequalities, of promoting gender equality, independent third-party organizations, and industrial experts in related fields could cooperate in publishing annual reports of gender-inclusiveness in video games, in which multi-player online games that host more than a certain number of global monthly active players (ex. five millions) will be examined with special attention.

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Run, Hide, Fight: How Female Gamers Understand and React to Sexism and Misogyny in Gaming

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Abstract

Through 41 in-depth interviews with female gamers from both Chinese-speaking gaming communities and those from English-speaking communities, this research questions female gamers' conceptualization of gendered gaming experiences, how they make sense of rampant sexism and misogyny in the gaming community, and what coping strategies have been deployed based on their answers to the previous two questions. The gendered gaming experience is not understood by female gamers as limited during game play, but are rather perceived by female gamers from three dimensions: gaming content, interactions with male players in games, and the atmosphere of the broader gaming community. While the previous two sources of gendered gaming experiences exert direct impact on female gamers' perceptions of sexism and misogyny in gaming, the indirect intimidation exerted by the hostile atmosphere of the male-dominated gaming community significantly influences two of female gamers' main coping strategies, which are "run" (quitting multi-player online games or avoiding playing with strangers) and "hide" (concealing female identity cues). Protesting against sexism or misogyny in gaming on the spot is reserved as the last option of "fight". Female gamers carefully calculate the social cost of standing out for themselves along two dimensions, their interpersonal relationships with the offender, and the purpose of perceived offense, which invites further investigation on the juxtaposition of online and offline social interactions in gaming, as well as the reproduction of pre-existing social inequalities in gaming experiences.

Key words