

Beyond the Screen: Women's Experiences of Sexism and Inclusion in Gaming Spaces

By

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I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of the MA in **Public Relations & Digital Communications**, is all only my own; based on my personal study and/or research, and that I have acknowledged all material and sources used in its preparation. I also certify that I have not used any form of ‘artificial intelligence’ or related software, nor copied in part or whole or otherwise plagiarised the work of anyone else, including other students.

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Abstract

This thesis explores how sexism is sustained, negotiated, and resisted in contemporary gaming communities, with a focus on online multiplayer environments and Reddit-based narratives. It raises four central research questions: (1) What historical and cultural factors have contributed to the perception of gaming as a male-dominated space? (2) What are the most common forms of gender-based harassment and discrimination experienced by female gamers? (3) How are gender stereotypes and toxic behaviours reinforced or challenged in community-driven content and discussions? (4) How do female gamers respond to exclusionary behaviours, and what coping strategies or forms of resistance do they adopt.

To address these questions, the study adopts a mixed-methods design. Quantitative data was gathered via an online survey (n=79 valid responses) examining demographics, gaming habits, and experiences of inclusion or harassment. Qualitative data included thematic analysis of Reddit from three subreddits: r/Gaming, r/GirlGamers, and r/GamingCircleJerk. Coding was inductive and informed by feminist theory, incorporating concepts such as affective labour, silencing, and platform affordances.

The research findings show that exclusion is both cultural and infrastructural. Female gamers report frequent instances of sexism, objectification, and gatekeeping, which are exacerbated by the dynamics of the platform. Importantly, the internal group tensions illustrate that exclusion is not only external, but also internalised and negotiated within marginalised groups.

This study argues that policy responses to online sexism must go beyond individual behavioural sanctions and address the structural inequalities.

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List of Abbreviations

AAA – Triple-A (a classification used for high-budget, high-profile games)

CAGR – Compound Annual Growth Rate

EU – European Union

FPS – First-Person Shooter (a video game genre)

GDPR – General Data Protection Regulation

GIF – Graphics Interchange Format

LGBTQ+ – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and other identities

MMO – Massively Multiplayer Online (a type of online game)

NYU – New York University

PEGI – Pan-European Game Information

RTÉ – Raidió Teilifís Éireann (Ireland’s National Public Service Broadcaster)

UK – United Kingdom

US – United States

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Chapter I: Introduction

The global video game industry has rapidly become the largest entertainment sector in the world, significantly ahead of cinema and music. In 2024, the gaming industry generated approximately \$187.7 billion in global revenue (Newzoo, 2024), significantly exceeding the \$29.6 billion earned by the global recorded music industry (Statista, 2024) and \$28 billion from the global box office (RTÉ, 2025). With a projected compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 3.1%, the industry is expected to top \$213 billion by 2027, fuelled by tech innovations and a growing player base. What started as just a niche hobby has turned into a multifaceted social, cultural, and economic phenomenon. Nowadays, video games aren't just played, they're streamed, watched, talked about, and monetised in a whole ecosystem of platforms, creators, and communities. Celebrities and influencers show up as game characters, global brands host virtual events, and online friendships begin in multiplayer lobbies.

The more games turn into huge interactive social communities, the more they bump into issues like digital regulation, media responsibility, and social inclusion. Despite their cultural popularity, games have long remained outlying in EU digital policymaking. Regulatory efforts have largely focused on more traditional media sectors (television, newspapers, etc.), leaving the gaming industry under the control of predominantly horizontal frameworks such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) or EU consumer protection laws. While moderation, transparency, and illegal content provisions apply in principle, in practice, gaming platforms continue to operate in a regulatory grey zone (A&L Goodbody, 2022). This discrepancy between regulation and reality raises serious questions about user responsibility and safety.

This gap and lack of clear oversight have allowed the industry to rely on voluntary self-regulation. Systems such as the PEGI (Pan-European Game Information) age ratings and internal

moderation protocols from platforms like Xbox or Steam offer some guidance but often lack transparency, consistency, and external enforcement. These limitations create significant protection gaps, particularly for women and minors (NYU Stern, 2023). The lack of specific regulatory standards and the industry's willingness to invest in robust community safeguards have contributed to the persistence of harassment and exclusionary practices.

According to Bryter's 'Women Gamers Report 2023', 65% of women gamers have experienced some form of toxicity in online games, and over 1 in 10 report receiving threats of sexual violence (Bryter, 2023, pp. 15-16). Such hostile behaviour is prevalent in multiplayer environments and among young players. Even though almost half of the global gaming audience is female, many women face constant barriers to inclusion, including harassment, objectification and aggression.

These findings are consistent with broader scientific research on cyber sexism and online violence. A review study conducted by Vergel et al. in 2023 describes a wide spectrum of gender-based violence within gaming communities, varying from sexist slurs to threats of rape and stalking. In some cases, this behaviour often spreads to other online platforms and even into real life, leading to serious psychological trauma and complete abandonment of gaming (Vergel et al., 2023).

At the same time, companies that profit from these platforms are slow to implement adequate moderation systems. Real-time voice chat and fast multi-user interactions pose real technical challenges, but the hesitation also reflects a broader "hands-off" culture. Gaming companies expressed concerns about losing users or interfering with players' freedom, but such inaction leaves a significant portion of their players vulnerable to abuse. Unlike the evolving

moderation standards applied in traditional social media, games still lag in accountability and enforcement (NYU Stern, 2023).

This background illustrates why the topic of this study is highly relevant to journalism and media communications. Online games are no longer isolated entertainment products. They are global media platforms that shape discourse, identity and belonging. However, structural factors (gaps in legislation, corporate inertia and deep-rooted gender bias) create exclusive and sometimes dangerous spaces for women.

This dissertation investigates how gender harassment in gaming environments is shaped by platform design, community culture, and the absence of effective regulation. It explores how women overcome these challenges and what their experiences reveal about broader issues of inclusion, governance, and digital participation in contemporary media spaces.

While more and more research focuses on sexism in video games, most of it is concentrated on analysing content or studying specific examples from industry practices. These studies provide important insights, but often fail to take into account the dynamics developing within gaming communities themselves, particularly how online interactions and multiplayer spaces contribute to the persistence of gender-based discrimination.

In addition, there are a limited number of empirical studies that use survey methods to obtain a broader sample of female gamers' opinions. Many existing studies are based on interviews or ethnographic observations, which provide depth but lack scalability. As a result, we still know relatively little about how widespread these experiences are, how they differ between subcultures (e.g., FPS vs casual games), and what forms of resilience or adaptation are most common. This research aims to fill that gap by combining survey data with content analysis to provide a more

comprehensive view of how sexism operates across both player interactions and community-generated content.

Research Objectives:

1. To explore the historical and cultural factors that have contributed to the perception of gaming as a male-dominated space.
2. To identify the most common forms of gender-based harassment and discrimination experienced by female gamers in online multiplayer environments.
3. To analyse how gender stereotypes and toxic behaviours are reinforced or challenged in community-driven content and discussions (e.g. forums, memes, mods).
4. To assess how female gamers respond to exclusionary behaviours, including coping strategies and community engagement.

Sexism in games is not just a cultural, but also a communication problem, deeply rooted in how digital spaces are designed, moderated and socially navigated. As games increasingly perform as interactive social and media platforms, the behaviours and norms embedded within them have real-world consequences for identity, community belonging, and access to public discourse. This research is quite relevant to the field of journalism and media communications, as it explores how media environments reflect and reproduce social inequity, as well as how marginalised groups attempt to gain a voice within them.

The results of this dissertation contribute to academic literature on gender and media in the context of digital platforms. For researchers studying media and gender issues, it contributes to the continuing debate about misogyny on the internet, digital participation, and community management. Finally, the results may be useful for communication scholars, platform designers, and policymakers who seek to create safer and more equitable digital spaces. The findings can also

provide a core for creating more responsive moderation systems or developing educational campaigns.

This research uses a qualitative methodology that combines survey-based data collection and content analysis. The survey gathers first-hand insights from female gamers about their experiences of sexism, harassment and community culture across different game genres and platforms.

Simultaneously, a content analysis is conducted on community-generated content such as Reddit threads, Discord conversations, memes, and user-created game modifications. This allows the study to examine how gendered norms are expressed and challenged in everyday discourse.

This dissertation is structured in **five chapters**, each designed to build upon the previous to create a coherent and logical investigation of sexism in gaming communities:

a) **Chapter I: Introduction:** This part explains the context and importance of the dissertation, outlines the goals and objectives of the study, identifies gaps in the existing literature, and gives a brief overview of the chosen methodology.

b) **Chapter II: Literature Review:** This part critically analyses existing research on gender representation in games, sexism in gaming communities, and the structural forces that shape patterns of exclusion. This chapter provides a theoretical foundation, summarising the relevant debates, identifying key gaps and establishing a conceptual framework that serves as a reference point for the dissertation.

c) **Chapter III: Methodology:** This part details the research design, including data collection tools, sampling strategy, and ethical considerations.

d) **Chapter IV: Data Analysis, Insights and Discussion:** This part presents the survey results and content analysis, based on the main research goals of the dissertation.

e) **Chapter V: Conclusion:** Summarises the key findings and analyses the research limitations.

This structure follows a logical progression from theoretical background to empirical insights, allowing for a clear and focused investigation of the topic. Each chapter builds toward a deeper understanding of how sexism is held and contested within gaming spaces.

Chapter II: Literature Review

This literature review examines how gender, power, and visibility are discussed in digital gaming culture, particularly about design, social norms, and platform infrastructure. Drawing on feminist media studies, game studies, and platform studies, it explores how games have developed not only as an entertainment industry but also as a contested cultural space shaped by masculine-coded histories of exclusion and the constant fight for inclusion.

Specifically, this chapter addresses research objective 1 by tracing how digital gaming was historically developed as a male-dominated cultural space. The process is driven by marketing strategies, design norms and public gatekeeping.

Throughout the review, the focus is on feminist and critical perspectives, as well as the lived experiences of those who are often pushed to the margins. Rather than treating representation, participation, or moderation as isolated issues, they are seen as interconnected structures shaped by culture, capital, and code that determine who can play, how, and at what cost.

These structural points provide the analytical foundation for this dissertation's empirical findings, discussed in Chapter IV.

2.1 Historical and Cultural Context of Gaming

The cultural history of video games reflects a broader trend in how society perceives play, identity, and technology. From their early arcade roots in the 1970s and 1980s, video games have transformed from a niche entertainment hobby into a multi-billion-dollar global industry that now permeates everyday life, cultural expression, and the digital economy. However, this expansion has occurred in parallel with the consolidation of the gaming space as a male-dominated space, which is the central issue of the first research objective of this study. The way gaming culture is

shaped (both in academic and social discourse) remains affected by persistent assumptions about who plays, what they play, and what it means to be a "gamer".

The early stages of video game culture were closely related to military-industrial research, fascination with science fiction and amateur experiments. In the United States, the 1970s saw digital gaming emerge from institutions like universities and arcades, with titles such as *Pong* (1972) and *Space Invaders* (1978) becoming iconic within both technical and popular discourses (Shaw, 2010). Pitroso (2024) highlights how these early games were shaped by overlapping cultural logics. For instance, military simulations, fantasy, and hacker subculture all combined to create the “foundational grammar” of gaming as a *masculine-coded* space. This link between early technological enthusiasm and masculinised cultural motifs helped to establish gendered expectations of who games were for. This dynamic is what this thesis aims to trace.

In the UK and other parts of Europe, the emergence of “bedroom coders” in the 1980s marked a phase of change where individual young men (often teenagers) developed and distributed games within sector-specific magazines.



Figure 1. Examples of prominent British gaming magazines from the 1980s and early 1990s: Your Sinclair (ZX Spectrum), Crash (ZX Spectrum), The One Amiga (Amiga), and Zzap!64 (Commodore 64). Image compilation by author from public domain scans via archive.org.

Some of the largest American software companies even started recruiting these amateur developers through the gaming press, which by then had already become the arbiter of taste and legitimacy in the industry (Pitroso, 2024). These structural dynamics support the notion that the gender imbalance in games was not an accident, but rather the result of intentional cultural constraints. This is an issue addressed in this research through both historical analysis and contemporary player experiences.

As gaming migrated into homes, marketing strategies increasingly targeted boys and young men, associating technical skill with masculine prowess. The figure of the “typical gamer” did not arise by chance. This character was carefully constructed through images on game boxes, the tone of gaming magazines and TV adverts. These marketing practices not only reflected dominant cultural ideals but also actively contributed to the creation of gaming as a gendered social identity. Such representations played a central role in the gendering of gaming spaces, demonstrating how marketing significantly contributed to the gaming industry's transformation into a male-dominated cultural field.



Figure 2. A collage of 1980s–1990s video game box art highlighting hypermasculine gamer imagery. Created by the author.

It's revealing to look back at this imagery now: muscle-bound men, space marines, robots, racing cars, and the occasional "princess" to be saved. The absence of alternative personalities was not an oversight, but a strategic choice.

Even early academic and journalistic treatments of gaming reflect this gendered bias. As Shaw (2010) observes, many canonised games (*Pong*, *Tetris*, *Doom*) were not only marked by their gameplay, but also retrospectively presented as "natural" stages in the game history. This selective canon excluded the contributions of less visible protagonists, such as women developers, LGBTQ+ communities, and players from outside the Global North. This exclusion further reinforced masculine identity in gaming, shaping both industry narratives and cultural memory. This insight is at the heart of the interpretation of this dissertation. The findings from this literature review will be revisited in Chapter IV, which compares how historical patterns of exclusion continue to influence the identities and visibility of female gamers today, based on survey data.

This foundational narrative is further sustained through cultural gatekeeping. With the diversification of gaming experiences, especially with the rise of online multiplayer formats or mobile games, the concept of a "gamer" remained surprisingly narrow. Only about half of Shaw's interviewees identified themselves as gamers, demonstrating that the label carried meanings beyond simply playing. As she explains, "gamer identity was described about the amount of time, money, and socialising they spent on games, the genres of games they played, and their knowledge of gaming subcultural references" (Shaw, 2014, p. 43). Rather, she points to a broader narrative that spans marketing, journalism and academia that reinforces the idea of who is a valid gamer. This includes not only the content of games, but also the structures through which games are circulated, reviewed and discussed.

The development of gaming culture from the 1970s to the early 2000s was not simply a matter of technological progress or commercial expansion. It was a process of cultural consolidation. Whether through arcades, home computing, LAN parties, or fan magazines, games were never just “played”. They were integrated into structures that determined who belonged and who did not. From Doom to e-sports, what came to be called “gaming culture” was never ideologically neutral.

2.2 Reproducing Stereotypes: Gender in Game Design

From the earliest platformers to today’s AAA-blockbusters, gender in game design has rarely been neutral. Female and gender diverse characters are not only underrepresented, but are often placed in worlds that view them as decoration, reward or comic relief. The visual design and game mechanics continue to reflect a narrow set of assumptions about gender identity and values. These design assumptions are not relics of the past, and the players in this research are still feeling their impact today. Several participants described how the constant use of hyper-sexualised female characters made them feel out of place or unwelcome, reinforcing the sense that the game space was not designed for them but for the male gaze.

A foundational study by Downs and Smith (2010) analysed twenty top-selling games in the US and found a significant gender gap in both presence and portrayal. Out of 489 coded characters, 14% were female and 86% were male. Among the female characters:

- a) 41% were dressed in sexually revealing clothing;
- b) 43% were depicted as partially or fully nude;
- c) 25% exhibited unrealistic body proportions.

In contrast, only 4% of male characters were shown partially or fully nude. These figures show how the difference becomes visible: women are present, but in very specific, sexualised

conditions. This pattern is not accidental, but mirrors the underlying constructs of how games pass on power and desirability.



Figure 3. Samus Aran revealed as female at the end of *Metroid* (Nintendo, 1986) — one of gaming’s first female protagonists, though her identity is only disclosed through a pixelated striptease.

This representation is not an isolated trend, but part of a longer-term pattern in gaming culture. As DeVaney (1993) and Muffoletto (2001) argue, gender stereotypes in game design do not just reflect existing views, but actively promote and normalise them (cited in Dickey, 2006). What we see on the screen is not just an aesthetic choice, but a cultural instruction on who should act and how.

Efforts to create “games for girls” in the 1990s often relied on essentialist ideas of femininity, which Dickey (2006) calls “interactive pink software”. These games were often based on stereotypical interests like home comfort, shopping, or beauty, for instance, games like *Barbie*

Fashion Designer (1996) or *The Baby-Sitters Club Friendship Kit* (1996). Such designs, while positioned as inclusive, often do not reflect the broader preferences found in the research, such as exploration, cooperation, rich narratives, and complex challenge structures (pp. 790-791).

Although such efforts introduced new marketing channels, they had little impact on the way how femininity was imagined in the game design logic. One of the most stable tropes in video game storytelling is the damsel in distress. In this formula, women do not function as agents of action, but as rewards, motivation or plot devices for male protagonists. Typical examples include *Princess Peach* (Super Mario), *Zelda* (The Legend of Zelda) and *Marian* (The Double Dragon), who serve as male catalysts for heroism instead of active players in the narrative.

In addition to narrative roles, women in games are often subjected to hyper-sexualised visual representation.



Figure 4. Examples of hypersexualised female character design in video games. From left to right: early Lara Croft (Tomb Raider, 1996), an armoured character from TERA (2011), and Ivy Valentine from Soulcalibur (1998).

This includes the use of objectifying camera angles (e.g. from below), exaggerated physical proportions, and non-practical clothing, such as armour that favours cleavage over protection.

These choices are not neutral: they function to confirm a gendered gaze and limit the range of acceptable female representation in games.

Moreover, even seemingly progressive gestures in representation can reproduce exclusion. Shaw (2014) argues that market-driven inclusion, which focuses on specific identity categories, often results in “separate-but-equal visibility” that does not challenge dominant structures. This approach, she notes, differs fundamentally from the transformative goals of media diversity (p. 150). This kind of inclusion feels less like a commitment and more like an accounting exercise: tick the diversity box, insert a queer or brown character, and move on. But counting bodies is not the same as shifting structures.

Similarly, Adams (2018) critiques how even “gender-inclusive” games often code nonbinary characters through visual tropes that align with whiteness, thinness, and masculinity as a presumed default. Characters who deviate from binary expectations are often portrayed as villains, monsters or comic characters, turning complex identities into a narrative script (Adams, 2018, pp. 54-55).

Representation without redistribution risks offering visibility without agency. The question is no longer just whether women are visible, but what that visibility costs. This tension between superficial diversity and deeper isolation is a core theme that emerges from the participants' reflections in Chapter IV.

2.3 Sexism, Harassment and the Culture of Toxic Play

Multiplayer online games may promise collaborative competition, but for many women, they also bring routine hate, silencing and surveillance. Harassment is now not just a bad side-effect of online play – it has become part of how some communities operate. This part provides a

theoretical framework for understanding the direct experiences described in this study, many of which resonate with the models of gender-based hostility described here.

A recent study by Bustos-Ortega et al. (2023) reveals that 63.3% of women reported being harassed while playing online video games, and 28% suffered sexual harassment, such as objectifying comments or threats of rape and death (p. 321). This is not just a set of individual behaviours, but a broader social tolerance (or expectation) that women will have to endure violence if they want to participate in society.

One of the main places of gender exclusion is voice chat. The simple action of speaking can expose players to immediate questions or hatefulness. One participant in Cote's (2015) study explained: "My username doesn't really give away that I'm a girl, and there are times when I don't use my mic when I'm playing, so people don't really know that I'm a girl" (p. 144). The voice becomes a danger, a gender marker that many women learn to disguise. This concealment is a self-defence tactic and a signal of deeper structural inequality.

Even when women are not actively harassed, their presence is often marked as unexpected or unwelcome. Cote (2017) notes that this logic "repeatedly excludes women from the general gaming community by treating them as anomalies, rather than as regular players". Presence alone is not enough to guarantee inclusion, especially when the dominant picture of a "gamer" is still stubbornly male.

Women interviewed by Cote (2017) described five main ways to combat harassment: avoiding strangers, camouflaging gender, relying on skill and performance, adopting an aggressive persona, or avoiding online multiplayer entirely (pp. 143–146). But none of these strategies solves the problem. As one participant put it directly: "These strategies are a Band-Aid. They're not a cure".

The tensions are even more visible in large-scale flashpoints such as #Gamergate. The campaign emerged in 2014, initially framed as a call for “ethics in games journalism,” but quickly devolved into coordinated harassment targeting women and marginalised people in gaming. It involved doxxing, rape threats, and mass trolling, particularly aimed at feminist critics, developers, and journalists. As Massanari (2015) claims, the campaign, which began with the targeted harassment of indie developer Zoë Quinn, quickly escalated into a sustained response against feminist voices in gaming and technology culture. Reddit was not just a passive witness: it became one of the most fruitful incubators of the campaign. Subreddits such as /r/KotakuInAction have flourished under the platform's “hands-off” philosophy, using pseudonymous moderation and karma-based visibility to legitimise misogynistic discussion under the cover of “free speech” (p. 335).

Crucially, this violence is rarely presented as violence. A significant part of them is spread through memes, GIFs and inside jokes. Forms of communication that allow harmful messages to spread virally while remaining undeniable. As Massanari notes, editors “rely on sharing links, commenting, and recounting memes and stories to encourage community connection” (p. 334), and in the case of Gamergate, this meant turning misogyny into punchlines. Misogynistic jokes, ironic slurs, and victim-blaming dog whistles all became tools to dismiss critique as humour and cast resistance as censorship.

What’s at stake isn’t just a few trolls behaving badly, but the exclusion framework itself. Harassment is only the most visible layer of a deeper system that constantly redraws the boundaries of who counts as a “real” player. It decides who can move through gaming spaces freely, and who must explain, perform, or defend their right to be there. Yes, some players adapt, find workarounds

or build protective strategies, but they do it in a system that was never designed for them. And that, in the end, is violence.

The impact of these structural dynamics is explored further through this study's survey responses, especially in how participants express everyday strategies of self-protection and coping.

2.4 Female and Marginalised Gamers' Experiences and Resistance

Despite the toxicity of many gaming spaces, women and marginalised players don't just survive in them: they adapt, create new rules of the game, and form their communities. These are not heroic narratives of victory, but rather daily navigation through a minefield where even silence or a pseudonym is a possibility. This act of carving out a safe space resonates with Shaw (2014), who notes that for many queer and female gamers, gaming is not just play. Many players in this study repeat this resistance, describing the importance of closed, supportive communities for both emotional support and political action.

Often, women respond to the hostility of online games by creating their own protective spaces. One of the most common responses is the creation of women-only guilds in MMOs and private Discord servers that serve as both social hubs and safety nets. Access to these spaces is often carefully regulated, with verification processes like voice chats or photo checks designed to ensure that members are who they say they are.

While these strategies are not without their drawbacks, they offer partial autonomy from the toxicity of the mainstream, enabling players to establish their boundaries and norms. Such communities function as both a refuge and a resistance: they reject the assumption that public gaming spaces are by default male. Chapter IV discusses examples of such spaces: from women-only Discord servers to online guilds, based on participant testimonies.

2.5 Platform Cultures and the Politics of Visibility in Gaming

Online platforms are not empty rooms where players just show up to interact. This is a complex engagement that often creates a hierarchy. From Reddit to Twitch, from Discord to YouTube, every click, every rule, every invisible algorithm sets the limits of which communities thrive and which ones are quietly buried. Their design, algorithmic structures, and governance policies actively influence the formation of norms, the efficacy of moderation, and the politics of visibility within these spaces (Gillespie, 2018). These insights into platform design are an important basis for interpreting how the infrastructure of gaming communities influences the appearance of gender toxicity, as further illustrated by the content analysis in this thesis.

As Gillespie (2018) argues, all platforms, by necessity, engage in content moderation, a process that is "essential, constitutional, and definitional" to their operation. This moderation, however, is often obscured or disavowed, creating an illusion of an "open" or "unregulated" environment (Gillespie, 2018, p. 21). This supposed neutrality becomes dangerous when combined with algorithmic bias and inconsistent moderation, especially during hot topics such as #Gamergate or "The Fapping" (Massanari, 2015). These moments revealed more than just the toxicity of user behaviour, but also the underlying structural capacities that allowed such content to spread and grow.

Massanari (2015) critically examines how Reddit's design and algorithmic logic contribute to the proliferation of "toxic technocultures." The platform's karma system rewards what is popular, not what is fair. This design encourages a kind of algorithmic "herd" effect, where prevailing views (often linked to white male geek identity) are amplified while disagreeing or marginalised voices are muted. In addition, the aggregation of content in Reddit subreddits, specifically in the /r/all feed, means that high-support material, even from niche or unacceptable

communities, can be widely accessed by new and unsubscribed users, creating their impression of the platform's overall culture (Massanari, 2015). The simplicity of creating pseudonymous accounts and sub-editing also contributes to a lack of responsibility, allowing users to engage in unethical behaviour with fewer consequences (Massanari, 2015).

This bias is not a bug – it is built into the system. Massanari (2015) shows how Reddit administrators often invoke platform neutrality to justify non-intervention, which, in practice, protects the loudest majority and “trampling over the rights of others” (p. 339). Meanwhile, moderation remains in the hands of unpaid volunteers who, as Matias (2019) claims, do important "civic labour" in difficult and unequal conditions. These moderators have limited tools, face conflicting expectations, and bear the emotional burden of holding communities together while absorbing the worst of online toxicity.

Affordance theory, pioneered by James Gibson and adapted to digital platforms by academics Gillespie (Gillespie, 2010) and Bucher (Bucher, 2012), argues that platform design is not neutral but actively “allows” or “invites” certain actions and patterns. In the context of online platforms, a function such as a ‘report’ button is not neutral. For example, its structure and location determine whether users feel the urge to act. The content is not filtered by algorithms but encodes political decisions about what matters and what must disappear (Bucher, 2012; Crawford & Gillespie, 2014, cited in Massanari, 2015).

Anonymity and pseudonymity create a paradox. On the one hand, a pseudonym can promote openness, creativity and self-expression, allowing users to discuss sensitive topics or experiment with identity without fear of social or professional repercussions (Massanari, 2015). On the other hand, they lower the social cost of harm. When users are not accountable to a stable identity, toxicity can rise. Especially in gaming, which can lead to "Online Disinhibition Effect,"

allows hate speech, trolling and violence to become part of the landscape (Liu and Agur, 2022). Even platforms such as Facebook, which require the use of real names, have not solved this problem, which shows that infrastructure alone can't fix culture (Gillespie, 2018)

Twitch, a live-streaming community hub, faced a wave of coordinated “hate raids” – massive invasions of streamers' chat rooms by bots or users who flooded them with misogynistic, racist or homophobic slurs. Twitch's capabilities, such as live chat, initially made these attacks possible. The company later introduced new tools: "followers-only mode," "subscribers-only mode," "clear chat," enhanced AutoMod levels (automated moderation), "non-mod chat delay," and "unique chat" to help streamers and their moderators combat these attacks (Twitch Safety Centre, n.d.). These fixes highlight a deeper point: design can cause harm as easily as it can prevent it.

Finally, there is the emotional cost. Moderating content, whether done by volunteers or low-paid contractors, is a psychologically brutal job. As Gillespie (2018) makes clear, moderators regularly face the "sewer channel" of the internet (p. 121). This impact can lead to psychological distress, burnout and cognitive exhaustion. And yet their work remains invisible and often unrecognised by the very platforms that depend on them to function.

2.6 Research on Game Cultures: Methods, Ethics, and Gaps

Research on gaming cultures and online communities uses a lot of methodological approaches to explore the multifaceted experiences of players. The most common methods include interviews, ethnography, content analysis, and surveys. Often in-depth and semi-structured, interviews allow researchers to explore players' subjective backgrounds and interpretations, as illustrated by the dozens of in-depth interviews conducted by Shaw (2014) to analyse identity, identification, and media representation in games. Ethnography, whether virtual or physical,

involves long-term immersion in a community to understand the norms, practices and social dynamics (Shaw, 2014, p. 47).

Content analysis systematically examines game texts, user-generated content, or communication patterns to identify themes, representations, or behavioural trends (Massanari, 2015, p. 330). Surveys, primarily anonymous online surveys, are valuable for collecting data from a large number of respondents, which allows for the identification of broader patterns and trends in the player experience.

Although these methods are useful, research on online game cultures requires a careful ethical approach. The nature of online spaces, which collapse the boundaries between public and private, complicates standard approaches to informed consent, anonymity, and data use (Chua, 2021). Researchers must navigate conflicts between research ethics and platform terms and conditions, especially concerning informed consent and anonymisation (Chua, 2021, p. 41).

The core concern is the vulnerability of respondents, especially women and marginalised groups, who often face harassment and misogyny in the online gaming environment. As outlined in Massanari's (2015) account of Reddit as a "hub for anti-feminist activism" and "toxic technocultures" where "systematic harassment" is not an aberration, but a norm. Exploring these experiences, especially through methods such as interviews or ethnography, requires care to avoid traumatising participants and putting them at risk. Even with anonymous surveys, it is important to follow ethical guidelines. This dissertation addressed these dilemmas with an anonymous online survey designed to prioritise respondent comfort and autonomy. The survey avoided collecting identifying information and allowed respondents to skip any question.

Despite the literature on gender and games growing, significant gaps remain, especially at the crossroads of identity, technology, and global context. First, the field still struggles with

intersectionality. Many studies treat “women gamers” as a single group, negating important distinctions between race, sexuality, class, or abilities, leading to a "restricted pluralism of consumption" where only marketable or easily categorised identities are considered (Shaw, 2014, p. 18). As a result, the experiences of queer women, racialised players, and those in precarious economic or social situations are often unstudied.

Secondly, the geographical bias remains noticeable: most research is still concentrated in North America and Europe. Without these perspectives, discussions of online harm, platform dynamics, or gendered experience risk reproducing a Europe-centric view of what gaming is and who gamers are. Finally, there is a blind spot in how to study toxicity. Many studies document harassment, but fewer examine how misogyny is normalised in platform design and features.

This study responds to these gaps through a mixed-methods approach that puts feminist ethics and lived experience at the centre of the research. It takes women's voices seriously, not as a single story, but as a range of perspectives shaped by different identities and contexts. Instead of viewing platforms as a neutral backdrop, it looks at how their design and rules determine what kinds of experiences are possible. And its understanding of online harm is not just something that happens between people, but something that is built into the way digital spaces work. By combining anonymous survey responses with close attention to platform design, this project tries to show both the what and the how: what women face in games, and how those experiences are made to repeat.

Chapter III: Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological framework used to explore how sexism manifests and remains in gaming communities. It focuses on how gender norms and patterns of exclusion are rooted in these spaces, and how women gamers experience and respond to them. The research is based on two core research questions: *(1) How do female gamers experience and perceive gendered dynamics in gaming spaces?* and *(2) How is sexism represented, normalised, or challenged in the discursive practices of gaming communities?*

To address these questions, I adopted a concurrent mixed-methods design, combining an online survey with a qualitative content analysis. The survey captures first-hand insights from female gamers, including their perceptions, emotional responses, and strategies for navigating stigmatising or negative environments. At the same time, content analysis explores the public narrative in online gaming communities, identifying recurring narratives, language patterns, and the social positioning of women in these digital spaces. Using both methods in parallel provides a more holistic and nuanced understanding of the interaction between individual experiences and community-level cultural dialogue.

This methodological combination, in my view, is the most appropriate for research on the *layered nature of sexism*, where personal experience must be contextualised within a broader discussion framework. The concurrent design follows the logic of *methodological pluralism*, as described by Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004, p.15), who argue that mixed methods enable researchers to “draw from the strengths and minimise the weaknesses of both” qualitative and quantitative paradigms. Similarly, Teddlie and Tashakkori (2012) describe *methodological eclecticism* as a key strength of mixed methods research. This concept refers to the flexible use of both qualitative and quantitative techniques, selected based on what best fits the research problem.

Rather than being bound to one specific approach, researchers are encouraged to choose the tools most appropriate for exploring their topic. In this study, such flexibility has allowed for a creative and responsive methodological design.

Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) emphasise that strong mixed methods research requires the meaningful integration of distinct qualitative and quantitative strands. When combined effectively, these approaches can produce richer and more insightful conclusions than either method alone. Moreover, this study follows a *pragmatic approach* to methodology. As Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) suggest, pragmatism allows researchers to focus on what works best for answering their research questions. It also supports *action-oriented inquiry* that addresses the real-world experiences of marginalised groups (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007).

In addition, this research also draws on a *feminist research paradigm*. It means actively listening to those who are often left without a voice. In my case, women navigating online environments, which are frequently dismissive or unwelcoming. More than just a description of social dynamics, it is a question of who holds power, whose voices are “valid”, and how researchers like me can challenge these patterns through the very way we choose to conduct research.

Following Hesse-Biber (2006), I understand feminist research as deeply connected to ethics, reflexivity, and the recognition that knowledge is never neutral. These values formed my approach in specific aspects: from how I framed open-ended survey questions to give participants space for their own words, to how I managed the online content carefully, resisting the desire to quote or analyse it in a way that would remove context or reduce complexity. This paradigm guided the tone of the project, which tries to amplify, rather than extract, meaning from the voices and texts it engages with.

3.1 Research Design

When thinking about how best to explore the complexities of sexism in gaming spaces, I realised that no single method could fully capture it. Personal experience, shaped by emotions and memory, required one kind of special attention. The public discourse, shaped by repetition and ideology, needed something different. That's why I chose a *concurrent mixed-methods design*: one that brings together a survey of female gamers with a qualitative content analysis of online game-related spaces.

Rather than treating these as separate layers, I approached them as different lenses through which to view the same landscape. The survey offered insight into how women perceive, interpret, and navigate their everyday experiences in gaming. On the other hand, the content analysis captured the recurring language, attitudes and social patterns that circulate in these communities more widely. By analysing both narratives concurrently, I was able to hold individual and collective narratives in dialogue with each other, without merging them, but letting them both inform and complicate each other.

This complementary logic aligns with what Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) describe as *methodological pluralism* – an approach that draws from the strengths of different methods to better understand complex realities. In the context of this study, that means using the survey not simply to validate what is seen in discourse, but to bring in voices and subjectivities that may be missing from public conversations. Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) similarly claim that integrating distinct strands can produce more nuanced, credible findings. The flexibility of mixed methods, as Teddlie and Tashakkori (2012) explain, lies not just in the combination of tools but in choosing the ones that are right for the question being asked. This was particularly important in a

case like this one, where both language and lived experience carry weight, but in very different ways.

This design also fits within the *feminist research framework*, which views lived experience and language not as separate domains but as co-constructed. Methodologically, this means remaining open to complexity, contradictions and context, choosing a design that reflects this openness.

3.2 Part I: Survey Methodology

Sampling and Participants

This research focused on the experiences of self-identified women who are active in gaming communities. The aim wasn't to produce neat generalisations or speak for all women gamers, but to listen closely to a range of personal perspectives, especially from those whose stories often go unheard in mainstream conversations about games.

To find participants, I used a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. The survey was shared across online spaces where gaming culture lives and breathes, such as Reddit (e.g., r/GirlGamers), Discord servers, and informal networks of players. These spaces were chosen for a reason: they are where community life takes place, alliances are built, conflicts occur, and gender dynamics are discussed in real time. Sharing the survey in these contexts also boosted the chances of reaching respondents who are already integrated into the online gaming culture, such as players, moderators or viewers.

To focus the research, I included a short screening at the beginning of the survey. Respondents were allowed to participate in the survey if they were eligible:

- a) Identified as women;

- b) Were 18 years of age or older;
- c) And were actively engaged in online gaming, either through multiplayer play or involvement in communities such as Discord, Reddit, or Twitch.

Those who did not meet these criteria were automatically excluded from the survey, with a short explanation. This approach helped to ensure that the data reflects the experiences of people directly involved in the types of spaces that were studied in the research. Although the study was not designed to be statistically representative, the resulting sample captured a wide range of gaming experiences and personal backgrounds. Participants were diverse in age, geography, playstyle, and relationship to online gaming communities. A summary of participant characteristics is outlined below.

Sample Profile:

- a) **Age.** Women ranged in age from 18 to over 55. Based on initial responses, many participants appeared to fall within the 18-34 age range, though older players were also represented.
- b) **Geographic Background.** Most participants were based in Europe. Some identified themselves as recent migrants, bringing perspectives shaped by both transnational and local contexts.
- c) **Gaming Behaviour.** Some played primarily solo, while a majority engaged in multiplayer games or co-op formats. Many were involved in online communities (Discord servers, forums, Reddit, Twitch chats).
- d) **Community Roles.** A few respondents had experience of moderating or helping to manage gaming spaces. This added nuances to their understanding of the power dynamics and gender interaction in the gaming environment.

- e) **Genre Preferences.** There was no single dominant genre. Respondents named FPS titles, RPGs, MMORPGs, simulation games, and casual/mobile games among their favourites.

As with any open online survey, likely voices were missing: less visible, less confident, or more exhausted by the need to explain themselves. Despite the differences in background and playstyle, what connected many of these responses was the sense of navigating a landscape that often makes women feel like outsiders, even in communities they've helped build.

Questionnaire Design

The survey was designed not only to collect information, but also to give the participants space for reflection, to choose their level of disclosure and to feel respected and valued throughout the survey. It combined *multiple-choice*, *Likert-scale*, and *open-ended questions* across five thematically structured sections. The overall flow was deliberate: it began with neutral and positive questions, gradually moving into more sensitive territory, allowing for trust and emotional safety along the way.

The survey was hosted on YouForm, a platform chosen for its user-friendly interface and calming visual design. This made it more accessible on both desktop and mobile and helped create a smoother, less clinical experience for respondents.

Before launching the survey publicly, I tested it with several friends who were familiar with online gaming culture. Their feedback helped improve the tone, clarify confusing phrasing, and adjust the order of questions so that the survey felt like a conversation rather than an interrogation. On average, participants completed the survey in around 7-10 minutes. The survey was divided into five key sections. Each of them was designed to answer specific aspects of the research questions, allowing for both emotional insight and topical clarity.

1. Introduction.

Participants were first presented with a short introduction outlining the aims of the research, the voluntary and anonymous nature of the survey, and a reminder that they could skip any question (see Figure 5).

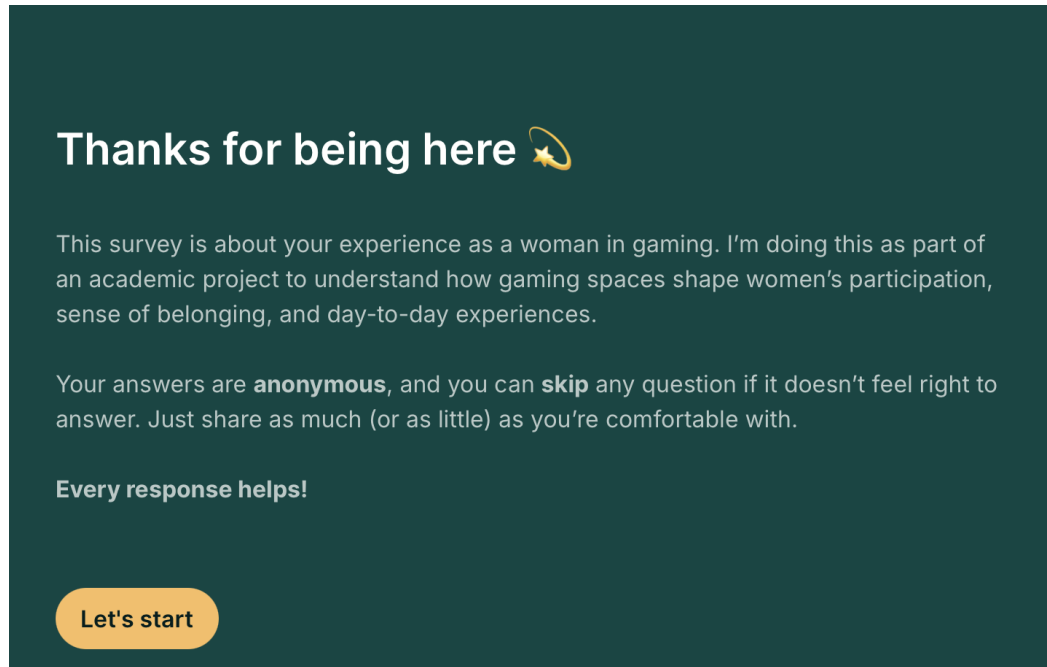


Figure 5. Opening screen of the online survey, including ethical information and tone-setting introduction

This opening was designed to create a welcoming and respectful tone, reflecting the feminist and ethically mindful approach of the research. This was followed by three screening questions:

“What is your gender?”

“How old are you?”

“Do you engage with online gaming spaces?”

Only those who were eligible to proceed:

- Identified as women;
- Were aged 18 or older;
- And were actively involved in online gaming spaces (as players or community members).

Participants who did not meet these criteria were politely exited from the survey and shown a short message thanking them for their interest (see Figure 6).

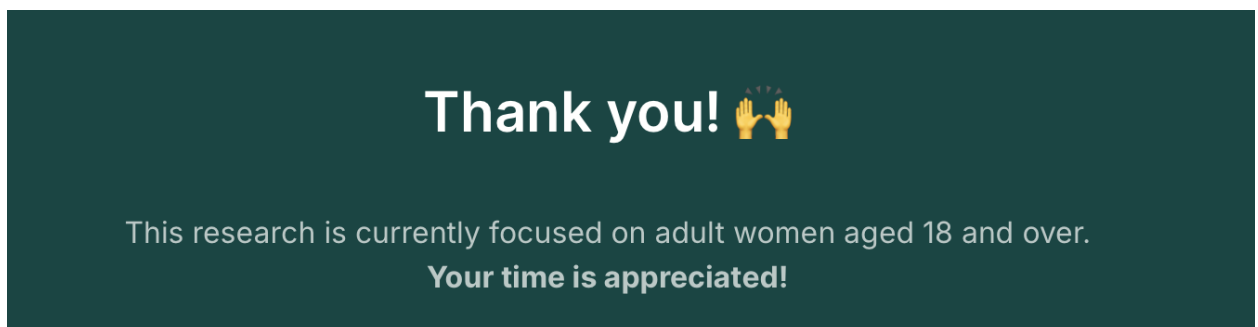


Figure 6. Exit screen for participants not meeting inclusion criteria (under 18)

This ensured that the dataset reflected the experiences of the population the project set out to explore.

2. Gaming Background.

It explored what kinds of games participants played, how often they played, and with whom. These details helped trace the diversity of gaming practices and how individual playstyles create impact on the community, which is particularly important for understanding how gender dynamics are encountered and overcome. Key questions included:

“Which types of games do you play most often?” (multiple choice)

“How often do you play games?” (Likert-style scale)

“Who do you usually play with?” (solo, friends, online communities, etc.)

If a participant selected *“I mostly play solo”* or *“I don’t play multiplayer games”*, a follow-up question appeared:

“Do you still participate in any gaming-related online communities (e.g., Discord, Twitch, Reddit)?”

Those who answered “No” were excluded from the survey, as the study focused specifically on the social layer of gaming experience. This section supported both research questions by situating participants within different types of gaming environments.

3. Community Experience.

Here, the focus moved to participants' interactions with community space, roles and support networks. This part helped to provide context for not only where participants encountered gender dynamics, but also how they contributed to community culture (e.g. members, leaders or moderators). Questions included:

“Have you ever helped moderate or manage a gaming community?”

“Have you participated in a women-focused gaming space?”

“How valuable was that space for you?” (Likert scale: 1–5)

“What do you enjoy most about gaming?” (open-ended)

This part is linked directly to the second research question, especially around *how sexism is challenged or resisted within communities*. Placing positive questions at this stage helped anchor

the research in everyday enjoyment and motivation, not just harm, following feminist principles of respect and balance (Hesse-Biber, 2006).

4. Gendered Experiences.

This section addresses the essence of the first research question: *how female gamers experience and perceive gendered dynamics in gaming spaces*. To allow for emotional nuance alongside thematic clarity, it included both closed and open-ended formats. Key questions included:

Have you ever experienced inappropriate or uncomfortable behaviour in gaming because of your gender?"

If “Yes,” participants were shown a checklist with options like: sexist jokes, harassment, being ignored or talked over, threats, etc.

“On a scale from 1 to 10, how often do you experience hostile or violent language while gaming?"

“Do you think your gender affects how others treat you in gaming spaces?"

“Have you ever hidden your gender in gaming contexts?"

Questions were framed gently, with clear options for skipping or choosing “Prefer not to say.” Their phrasing followed ethical recommendations for researching sensitive and emotionally complex topics (Liamputtong, 2007). Attention was paid to avoiding binary frames, emotionally loaded language, or any assumptions about the participants' past experiences. The purpose was not to push them to open up, but to make them feel that it was possible on their terms.

5. Stories and Solutions.

The final section gave space for personal narrative and imagination:

“What’s one moment when you felt welcomed, supported, or empowered in gaming?”

“What’s one moment when you felt excluded or targeted because of your gender?”

“In your opinion, what would help make gaming more inclusive for women and marginalised genders?”

This final section was designed to focus on the participants’ involvement, not on trauma, but on voice, memory and hope.

At the end of the survey, participants were also offered links to inclusive, women-led gaming communities, such as *r/GirlGamers* and *thegamehers** – a small gesture of solidarity and care. This reflects the broader values of the project: not only to collect experience, but also to help create spaces where this experience is seen, heard and supported.

Data Collection Procedures

The survey was created and shared using YouForm, a platform chosen for its user-friendly interface, clear design and high level of privacy. Compared to more common tools like Google Forms, YouForm provides an easier-to-navigate and more visually appealing experience. There is no clutter on one page, the survey moves step by step, which is more convenient, if it is difficult for a person to read small text. Also, you can make the design any way you want, for example, choose neutral colours.

The survey was open for responses for 3 weeks, during which I actively shared it across Reddit and Discord. On Reddit, the survey link was posted in relevant communities, such as

r/GirlGamers, where many members already discuss gendered experiences in gaming. In addition to Reddit, I also shared the survey in closed gaming-focused Discord servers, where women and marginalised gamers often build smaller, safer spaces. The platforms were chosen because they reflect the real social infrastructure of gaming culture today. Games are not just played, they are talked about, broadcast, moderated, and memed, often in Discord chats or on Subreddit.

No financial incentives were offered for participating in the study. Instead, the tone of the call for responses emphasised the value of the participants' lived experiences, turning the survey into a contribution to a wider conversation. This approach was also in line with the feminist principles of the project: to focus on the voices of those who are often excluded from both gaming spaces and academic analysis, and to do so on their terms.

The tone of the recruitment messages was intended to reflect the values of the study: openness, empathy and respect. As a gamer myself, I deliberately wrote the invitation in an informal, friendly tone, typical of community chats, hoping to meet people on their terms. Instead of positioning participants as “data sources,” I invited them as peers and experts on their own experience.

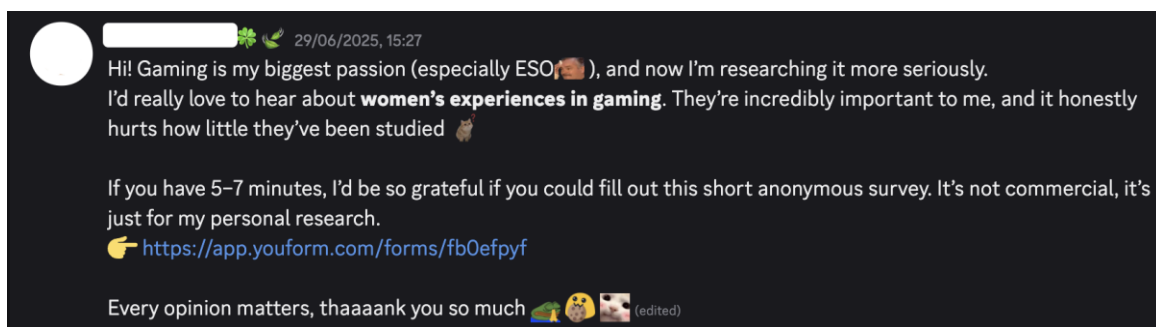


Figure 7. Survey invitation message shared in a gaming-focused Discord server

The decision to use online distribution methods was not only practical, but also methodologically relevant. Gamers (especially those who participate in online communities like Discord servers) are already active in the digital space. Surveying Reddit and Discord allowed me

to reach people in the environment where these dynamics are actually playing out, and also provided a degree of anonymity that may have contributed to more honest or vulnerable responses.

In total, 128 people started the survey, with 102 reaching the main demographic section. After screening, 79 eligible responses from self-identified women were included in the final analysis.

Data Analysis Techniques

The survey produced both *quantitative* and *qualitative* data, which were analysed using different but complementary strategies. For *quantitative* data (e.g., Likert scale questions and multiple-choice responses), I used descriptive statistics, primarily frequency counts and pivot tables. This was to identify patterns in age groups, playing styles or levels of community involvement. This helped to build an overall picture of how often patterns of behaviour or experiences occurred, as well as to see how different variables might interact with each other. All of this was done manually in Microsoft Excel, which allowed for flexible sorting, comparing and commenting on the qualitative material alongside the quantitative data.

The open-ended responses were analysed using manual thematic analysis. I began with an inductive approach, reading through all responses without pre-set categories, and making notes about recurring ideas or emotional tones. This choice was guided by the desire to stay close to the actual language and emotional tone of each answer.

As the sole researcher on this study, I conducted the whole coding process myself. To improve accuracy, I reviewed and refined my codes over several rounds, recorded uncertain or conflicting responses in a reflective diary, and critically evaluated how my own biases might affect the development of the theme.

After patterns began to emerge, such as feelings of isolation, references to women-only spaces, and stories of casual exclusion or sexist assumptions, I began to group the responses into thematic groups. Some categories formed naturally from repeated phrasing (e.g., “I don’t use voice chat,” “they talked over me,” “supportive Discord server”). Others were later refined using ideas from feminist research, such as:

- a) **Silence or avoidance** – avoiding voice chat or hiding gender;
- b) **Act-switching** – adapting behaviour to avoid harassment;
- c) **Emotional labour** – trying to stay polite while being mistreated;
- d) **Acts of solidarity** – praise from other women, in-game support;
- e) **Fatigue and resignation** – “that’s just how games are”.

These categories reflect not only what participants experience but also how they’ve learned to manage, navigate, or push back against the dynamics around them. Some comments described joyful or empowering moments, because the goal was not only to track harm, but to understand feelings. The themes identified here are explored further in Chapter 4, with illustrative quotations and a discussion of how they connect to broader community patterns and narrative analysis findings.

As a woman who for many years was a part of online gaming communities, I approach this research both personally and critically. I experienced both solidarity and sexism in multiplayer environments and communities, which formed not only my interest in the topic but also my sensitivity to its complexities. These backgrounds led me to be sensitive to the emotional labour, exclusion, and moments of support described by participants. While I do not claim to be neutral, I am reflexively aware of how my own experiences and assumptions influence the way I ask questions, interpret data, and represent the voices of others. At the same time, I remained

reflexively aware of the risks of over-identification or projection, and took care to let participants' voices remain central throughout the analysis.

3.3 Part II: Content Analysis Methodology

Objectives

This part of the research directly responds to the second research question: *how sexism is represented, normalised, or challenged in the discursive practices of gaming communities*. Whereas the survey recorded individual experiences, the content analysis aimed to explore how wider social narratives shape, reflect or bias these experiences. The challenge was not just to identify toxic language or track gender references, but to take a closer look at the narratives, frames and community logics that give sexism cultural validity.

Specifically, this method aimed to explore:

- a) How gender is presented and discussed in public gaming dialogue;
- b) What types of framing (e.g. ironic, defensive, dismissive, hostile) occur most often;
- c) How power acts through voting, silence, humour and repetition.

This approach follows Krippendorff's (2013) view of content as symbolic and performative, not merely descriptive. In other words, content analysis allowed me to investigate how culture speaks back to women in gaming. Each comment was read not only for what it said, but also for how it resonated with (or disrupted) the dominant discourse in this digital space.

We don't live, play, or talk in a vacuum. When certain messages are repeated often enough, whether it's sarcastic jokes about 'fake girl gamers', dismissal of gender criticism, or casual references to harassment as inevitable, they start to settle in as background noise. Over time, this

noise becomes the environment itself. Reading this narrative alongside the survey responses helped to clarify how these patterns are assimilated, resisted or reinterpreted depending on the context.

Due to the communities studied include marginalised voices, I approached the data through a feminist and ethically reflective lens. Following the feminist methodology of Hesse-Biber (2007), I treated language not as neutral but as a space where agency, resistance, and exclusion are constantly negotiated. A space where repetition becomes ideology and silence speaks as loudly as speech.

Material selection

This part of the research focused on what the game community says. Not in curated interviews or official reflections, but in public, everyday conversations where norms are generated, repeated, and sometimes challenged.

To trace these patterns, I chose Reddit, which hosts large volumes of gaming-related discussion and makes visible the social mechanics of online interaction. Reddit's structure makes approval and rejection visible: upvotes push comments higher, downvotes indicate conflict, and subreddits create their tone and thresholds for what is acceptable. These features have made Reddit particularly useful for studying how narrative develops, spreads, and gains validity in real time.

The analysis included only publicly available threads. Private Discord servers, blocked subreddits, and deleted content were excluded to ensure ethical transparency and respect for the boundaries of consent. The study aimed to observe how people interact when they know they are talking in a semi-public space.

For this study, I chose to focus on three subreddits that each offer a distinct angle on how gender is talked about, joked about, defended, or dismissed within gaming culture. Together, they form a kind of discursive triangle, because each brings a different kind of voice into the picture:

- a) **r/GirlGamers** is a moderated, women-centred space built around solidarity, validation, and support. It was important for me to include a space where gender wasn't up for debate, but acknowledged as part of everyday reality. Here, conversations tend to be more personal, reflective, and grounded in shared experience. The subreddit also uses flairs like "serious," "community," or "game discussion," which help frame the tone and purpose of each post. This frame allowed me to trace how women express frustration, joy, fatigue, or pride without having to defend the authenticity of their presence in the games.
- b) **r/GamingCircleJerk** is a willfully sarcastic and self-aware space. It exists to ridicule the worst tendencies of gaming narrative, often through memes, jokes, or outright social commentary. This dynamic made the subreddit valuable not for its directness, but for its deviation. It reveals cultural fatigue, repetition, and how difficult conversations are metabolised through humour. Including this space offered insight into how gender discourse circulates even when no one wants to talk about it "properly."
- c) **r/Gaming** is one of the largest and most general-interest gaming subreddits related to games and gaming culture. Unlike niche or community-specific spaces, it positions itself as neutral and widely accessible to a wide range of players across platforms, genres, and demographics. The subreddit is relatively well-moderated, with strict rules against overt hate speech or off-topic posts. This moderation creates a space that appears balanced on the surface, but often reveals deeper tensions when issues of gender or representation emerge.

Content was collected over one year. This allowed me to capture both rapid-fire reactions (threads that flared up and faded) and slower, deeper conversations that developed over time. Some

posts were related to headlines, while others had no clear trigger, just people circling familiar arguments again.

Threads were included if they:

- a) directly or indirectly related to gender, representation, identity or harassment;
- b) had over 100 comments or at least 1000 upvotes;
- c) or were tagged by Reddit's algorithm as controversial.

This wasn't about cherry-picking the worst. It was about looking at the visible layers of conversation, where people read and engage with. The visibility of certain comments is not purely a reflection of user preference. Reddit's ranking algorithm determines which voices are amplified and which remain hidden. Upvotes, timing, and engagement levels all influence what appears at the top of a thread.

Depending on thread length and comment richness, between 20 to 35 top-ranked comments per thread were selected, resulting in a final dataset of 377 comments across 9 threads. This made it possible to identify the types of responses that gained the most community approval or attention. They were selected based on visibility, not tone. I relied on Reddit's default sorting algorithm (typically "best" or "top") to identify the most seen and interacted-with contributions within each thread. However, within those visible comments, no filtering was done for tone or position. This allowed me to analyse not only what was said, but also what surfaced and how different types of responses were shared in the public conversation.

The final dataset:

- a) 9 threads across 3 subreddits;
- b) approximately 350 to 400 individual comments.

Each comment was treated as a discursive unit. Coding focused on thematic content, rhetorical strategies, positioning of gender, emotional tone, and how community dynamics were reproduced or challenged through language. In many cases, humour acted as an ideological filter, allowing dismissive or exclusionary views to circulate more freely under the guise of irony or meme logic.

Coding Process and Reliability

The coding process was designed as a balance between close, intuitive reading and thematic consistency. In keeping with the symbolic and performative view of content outlined earlier (Krippendorff, 2013), I treated each comment as more than just a discrete opinion. What matters is not only what is said, but how, when, and with what social effect.

I started by reading the threads without a fixed list of categories. Instead of sticking on ready-made labels, I made open notes about what stood out: repeated expressions, changes in tone, humour and emotional highlights. As I moved through the comments, certain themes kept appearing: defensiveness, sarcasm, merit-based arguments, or emotional distance. These patterns repeated enough that I began shaping a set of codes that could carry across different threads but still stay close to the language people actually used.

The survey responses helped me notice patterns that weren't always obvious at first. For instance, the idea of "gender fatigue" – people reacting with tiredness or irritation any time sexism comes up. I didn't treat comments in isolation. Things like flair tags, thread titles, and voting patterns also shaped how a comment landed, so I kept those in mind while coding. Each code reflected not just what someone said, but how they said it: tone, language style, or shared in-jokes. Each comment was also assigned a tone descriptor (e.g. dismissive, reflective, sarcastic), in order

to capture not just thematic intent but also emotional and rhetorical delivery. This layer allowed me to track how affect and style interact with meaning and community response.

Since I was coding everything myself, I made sure to review previous threads to ensure coherence. Sometimes, new code would be released later, and I'd review old comments to see if it also applied there. The goal wasn't to sort comments into "good" or "bad" categories. It was to understand the patterns through which gender becomes visible or invisible, contested or normalised, in the everyday talk of gaming communities.

All coding was done manually in Microsoft Excel. I chose not to use specialised software like NVivo because I wanted to stay close to the actual language and flow of the conversations, rather than fragmenting them into technical categories. To reduce bias, I relied on recursive reading and reflective notes throughout the process. Since I was the only coder, I was not looking for formal objectivity, but rather accountability.

I have summarised the key components of the process below. This overview highlights the main decisions, tools, and values that shaped the analysis.

Aspect	Description
Method	Manual coding
Platform	Microsoft Excel
Coding Logic	Inductive + deductive approach, based on emerging patterns and literature
Consistency Checks	Recursive reading and applying new codes backwards and forwards
Bias Awareness	Tracking of emotional responses and interpretive hesitation
Reflexivity Tools	Reflective memoing and side-notes

Table 1. Summary of key aspects of the content analysis coding process, including tools, logic, and reflexive strategies

In the beginning stages of my analysis, I did approach the Reddit discussions without a pre-determined coding pattern. Instead, I engaged in an open-ended reading process, taking notes in an open-ended manner on recurring expressions, emotional tone, rhetorical strategies, and implicit assumptions. This inductive approach was influenced by feminist content analysis practices that emphasise attention to the everyday, the affective, and the structurally based.

Initially, emotional patterns (irritation, frustration, self-defence, sarcasm) and repeated tensions around visibility, normativity and social expectations were highlighted. Earlier annotations included phrases such as ‘expressions of shame’, ‘normalisation of real bodies’, ‘closing discourse through humour’ or ‘ironic misogyny’. Over time, as certain semantic and emotional motifs reappeared in various threads and subreddits, these notes began to form the protocodes.

The table below illustrates this formative process, it presents a selection of early-stage comments.






Comments	Code	Interpretive Note
 <p>I have a slight valley girl accent which makes people automatically treat me like I'm dumb and it's very frustrating. Especially since I was never afraid of talking until people started treating me like that.</p>	Body Shame Response, Safe Space Betrayal	Signals emotional exhaustion from gender rejection. Describes how social reactions reduce the confidence and expression of the speaker over time.
 <p>I play games to have fun and escape the drudgery of reality, not to be sucked back into social drama and the complexities of identity politics and real world politics. Worse even if I have to navigate those minefields in games.</p>	Claimed Neutrality	Presents games as neutral escapism, and treats social topics such as gender or politics as intrusive. Masks a political position as a desire for objectivity.
 <p>That's one ugly a:s b..ch lmao</p>	Humour/Sarcasm	It turns the logic of mockery into a criticism of the dominant views in society.
 <p>To be fair, that's a lot of woman. I don't know any woman that is interested in this kind of game, so it's weird to me.</p>	Selective Support	Accepting the existence of something only if it is invisible. These comments often reflect discomfort with visibility or challenge the idea of it.
 <p>Most of the front page will summarize best why, but this and many other subreddits went private to protest censorship on Reddit. The mention of a certain person who is no longer working for Reddit resulted in a bunch of people getting bans.</p>	Platform Commentary	Reflections on moderation on Reddit and its role in defining what topics can and can't be openly discussed. Highlights tensions at the community level over visibility and speech.

Table 2. Illustrative examples of early coding: selected Reddit comments, assigned codes, and corresponding interpretive notes

Each comment is presented along with the corresponding code and a short note explaining how it influenced the coding system. It has been improved through recursive re-reading, combining and dividing codes, and checking their clarity in different lines. For instance, *Body Shame Response* initially included both anger and fatigue, but was later separated from *Safe Space Betrayal* to reflect different rhetorical positions, where one personal, the other relational.

This stage of the research was not only analytical, but also emotional. I had to sit in discomfort, reread seemingly hostile or ironic comments through different lenses, and remain aware of both discursive patterns and their emotional texture.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

This project involved both direct engagement with participants (via survey) and the analysis of publicly available online content. From the way the survey was presented to the way comments on Reddit were handled, the goal was to treat people's words and experiences with care, even if they were anonymous or indirect.

At the welcome page of the survey, participants saw a short intro: what the study was about, how their data would be used, and their freedom to skip any question or leave at any time (see Figure 1). The survey did not collect any names or identification details, and all responses were kept anonymous. This was not just a technical solution, but a way to give participants control over what they wanted to share and to make them feel that their safety and comfort mattered. Participants could skip any questions which are uncomfortable, without penalty or explanation. Those who did not meet the criteria were politely removed from the survey.

Some questions related to personal or potentially painful experiences (e.g., harassment, isolation, or gender-based hate), so I tried to build trust gradually. The survey began with neutral and positive questions, and moved gradually into more sensitive territory. At the end, I included links to supportive communities like [r/GirlGamers](#) and [thegamehers*](#), as a small gesture of solidarity and care. So I wanted not just to collect data, but to give people something in return.

The content analysis involved data from public Reddit threads. It is an open platform, but that doesn't mean ethical questions disappear.

Even when usernames are pseudonymous, the things people say can carry emotional weight or reputational risk. Sometimes, a user may have a long-standing account that is well-known in certain communities. Even without a "real name", a comment can be linked to a specific person in the community.

For that reason, I chose not to include usernames in the dissertation, particularly when a comment was being analysed in depth. Where the quotes were used more illustratively and the user was using an obvious “throwaway” or “novelty” account (e.g. u/throwaway111111), the ethical risk was lower. But in general, I tended to be careful. Comments were anonymised where necessary, while maintaining tone and context.

All the topics were taken from open subreddits, which can be viewed without log-in, so the content was considered public. However, I did not think of it as "free data". These posts were cultural signals, small moments when something stuck, resonated, or provoked. This required not only analytical sharpness but also basic respect for the people behind the screen.

Although the study did not involve interviews or face-to-face interactions, it still engaged directly with participants. So I submitted a full application to the Research Ethics Committee at Griffith College. The study was reviewed and approved by the Committee. More importantly, it was shaped by a broader culture of ethical research: transparency, careful consideration, and a constant awareness of what it means to interpret others' words. Following Hesse-Biber's (2007) feminist framework, I tried to remain mindful of power, both the power that people have to speak and the power that I have to construct how that language is represented. As she notes, feminist research involves constant self-reflection and an awareness that research is never neutral, but is shaped by the position, social context and interpretive power of the researcher.

Ultimately, this ethical approach was not about perfection, but about responsibility: to stay accountable to the people whose words shaped this project, even if I never met them.

3.5 Limitations and challenges

This study, like most qualitative research, was based not only on what was included but also on what was hidden. I didn't try to capture the universal truth about women gamers, I just tried to be close to the voices I could reach. However, some limitations are important to mention.

The survey was completed by 79 respondents who provided valid answers. While this number provides breadth and depth of coverage, it does not represent a statistically representative sample. The stories we share are mostly from women who are already active participants in online gaming, especially those who have the interest, time and motivation to respond.

As the survey was done through a snowball sampling approach, the results are likely to be biased towards those already connected to certain communities. I tried to mitigate this by sharing the link across both large public forums and smaller, more private groups, but some voices were inevitably missed. Some voices, especially those of more marginalised, burned-out or disengaged actors, may have been missed due to the structure of the method rather than by design.

People tend to participate when they have to say something strong. This emotional impact becomes part of the dataset, but it also narrows the tone of the data. It reflects the feeling of the game space, not necessarily what it is in a generalised way. These limitations do not diminish the value of the information, but only locate it. The goal was never to generalise, but to make visible a certain kind of living reality.

Any safe gaming space (especially Discord servers targeted at women or marginalised genders) is strictly moderated. And there's a valid reason for that. These spaces often exist because more open spaces failed to provide safety or recognition. In most cases, I had to describe my research, demonstrate that I was a woman, and convince the moderators that the study would not harm the space or its participants. Even then, it required negotiation - a slow process of building

trust, rather than just collecting data. This meant that the content I could access was moulded through control as much as by care. This represents both the difficulty of accessing marginalised voices and the protective infrastructure these voices had to build for themselves.

In terms of Reddit, it's valuable to note that the platform is never neutral. The algorithms and community dynamics mould what is visible. Upvotes, reviews, and moderation policies influence which voices grow and which fade away. So while I studied public narratives, I had to be aware that visibility itself is curated. The three subreddits offer a rich contrast, but they still represent certain corners of gaming culture. More global, console-specific, mobile, or non-English-speaking spaces are kept out of the frame.

I did all of the coding. While this helped me to be reflective and consistent, it also meant that everything was filtered through one interpretive lens. To reduce blind spots, I returned to the data repeatedly, re-coded earlier material as new themes emerged, and kept a reflective memo alongside the spreadsheet. Tone was one of the hardest things to code. The sarcasm, irony and humour of memes are difficult to analyse out of context. Especially in r/Gamingcirclejerk, the tone often matters more than the content. I made notes on the tone descriptors (e.g. dismissive, ironic, sincere) alongside the topic codes, but the risk of misreading remains.

As a gamer and a woman, I recognised parts of myself in the stories people shared, the silence, evasion, and doubt. I had to balance between analysis and recollection, between being a researcher and feeling involved. Reddit is public, but that doesn't mean it's free to write whatever you want. I anonymised usernames. When comments were written on behalf of accounts that were being discarded or intended for humour, I treated them differently from deeply personal posts. However, the balance between respecting visibility and protecting vulnerability is never perfect.

Sexism in games doesn't always show up as hate. Sometimes it's weariness, mockery, or aesthetic gatekeeping. These moments are harder to see and harder to code, but they are equally important. Thematic analysis helps to clarify the situation, but real-life experiences are rarely transparent. Some of the richest insights have come from contradictions: a moment of praise buried in sarcasm, or tiredness wrapped in irony. I have tried not to force these moments into clear categories.

These are not simply research limitations but part of what makes such work feasible. Studying culture means studying something unstable, reactive, and emotional. That tension isn't a weakness. It's precisely what makes the work feel real.

Chapter IV: Data Analysis, Insights and Discussion

This section provides the empirical findings of the study through a thematic analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, organised around key patterns derived from the participants' backgrounds. Based on a mixed-methods approach, the study combines the findings of an anonymous online survey (81 female responses) and a content analysis of 240 comments on Reddit from three game-related subreddits. Together, these data create a multi-level insight into how gender, identity, and community are navigated in online gaming culture.

The chapter is organised by thematic approach instead of by method or research question. This reflects the inductive, iterative nature of the analysis, in which themes were developed through close engagement with the data rather than being imposed a priori (Braun & Clarke, 2006). At the same time, the structure ensures that each topic is linked clearly to one or more of the research objectives that were set:

1. To explore the historical and cultural factors that have contributed to the perception of gaming as a male-dominated space.
2. To identify the most common forms of gender-based harassment and discrimination experienced by female gamers in online multiplayer environments.
3. To analyse how gender stereotypes and toxic behaviours are reinforced or challenged in community-driven content and discussions (e.g. forums, memes, mods).
4. To assess how female gamers respond to exclusionary behaviours, including coping strategies and community engagement.

The chapter begins by drawing a narrative baseline through survey data that outlines who the participants are, how they play, and how they engage with gender dynamics in games. These patterns are then expanded and contextualised through comments on Reddit, providing a deeper

understanding of tone, platform-specific possibilities, and narrative strategies such as irony or disengagement. This combination provides both width (through the survey patterns) and depth (through careful qualitative analysis), representing the research desire to explore the patterns and effects that shape the everyday experiences of female gamers.

Each thematic part integrates both data sources where relevant. For instance, the discussion of body shaming in character design draws on survey responses about discomfort with female avatars, but is also enriched by comments on Reddit that show how these feelings are expressed (or ignored) in public discussion. Likewise, coping strategies, such as gender masking or withdrawal, appear in both datasets, but with different levels of visibility and nuance.

Ultimately, this chapter demonstrates that gender experiences in games are more than just isolated or occasional. Instead, it is moulded by long-standing cultural narratives, platform environments, and social norms – processes that participants engage with both vulnerably and mindfully.

4.1 Patterns of Play and Gender Experience: Survey Foundations

Before diving into Reddit threads and discursive patterns, it's important to understand who's behind the voices in this research: what they play, how they act in the game spaces, and how gender shapes those choices. The survey (81 female responses) offers this grounding. Despite the limited number of responses, they provide a detailed insight into everyday habits, risks and silent discourse, which will be expanded upon in the following thematic topics.

The majority of survey participants were aged 18–24 (48%) and 25–34 (38%), with only 5% over the age of 35. This reflects a young adult audience of highly active female gamers who are also more likely to participate in digital surveys and online communities. They mostly lived in Europe, though several answered from outside the EU (Figure 8).

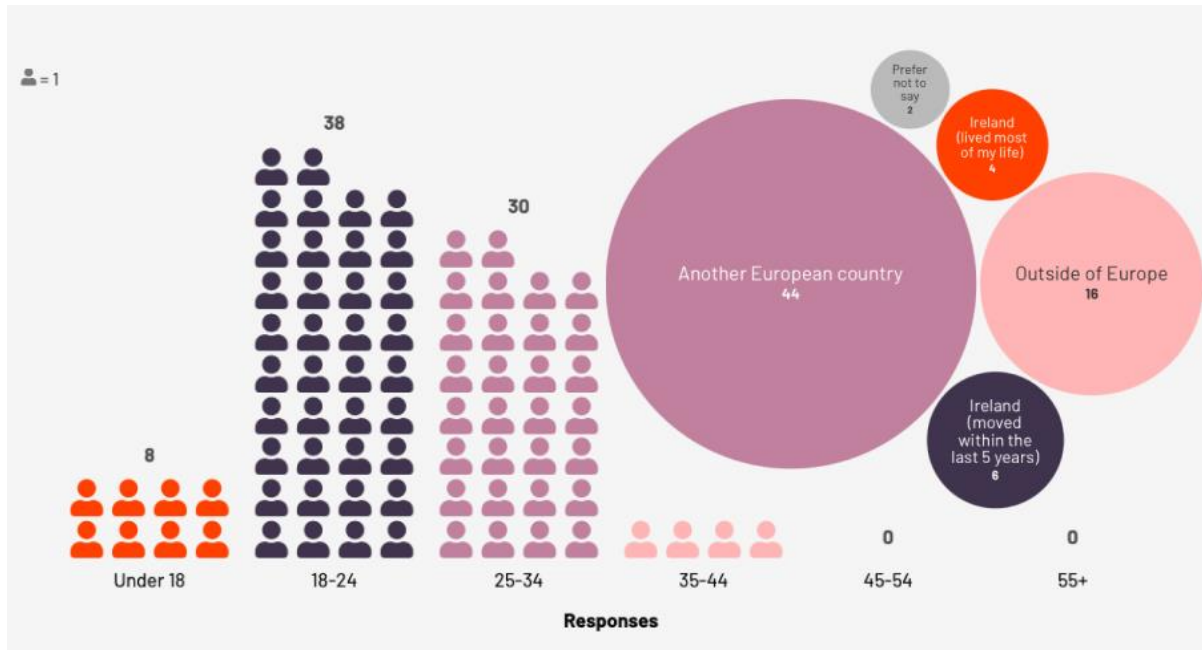


Figure 8. Demographics distribution of participants

Genre-wise, RPGs and story-rich games dominated: Skyrim, The Witcher, Dragon Age, Life is Strange. But there was also a solid presence of MMORPGs, shooters and competitive multiplayers, suggesting that participants aren't just hiding in cosy spaces, but also often right in the middle of high-stakes public arenas. This suggests a diverse but narrative-heavy gaming profile, often associated with immersion, character development, and emotional investment, rather than purely competitive dynamics.

This gaming preference aligns with literature highlighting how women are often drawn to rich storytelling, cooperative dynamics, and customisation (Dickey, 2006).

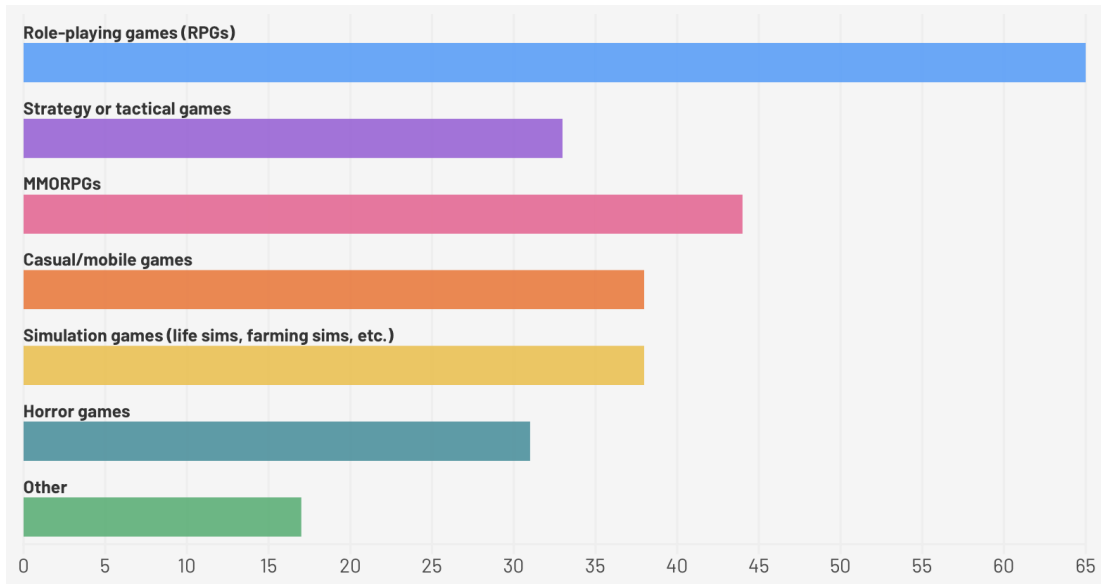


Figure 9. Frequency of genre mentions

However, the presence of FPS/MMORPG players also complicates stereotypical assumptions about “safe” or “feminine” genres, showing active engagement with competitive and public multiplayer environments. This reveals a diverse gaming landscape, countering stereotypes of women gravitating only toward less competitive genres (Figure 9).

Most participants played either solo or with friends they already knew. Very few regularly interact with wider online communities, and the reasons for this quickly become visible.

Around 70% said they had experienced gendered harassment. The most common forms:

- a) being assumed to be “bad” at the game (84%);
- b) sexist jokes (56%);
- c) being ignored or talked over in voice chat (48%).

This was more frequent in multiplayer-heavy genres like FPS and RPGs. These results are consistent with studies such as Bustos-Ortega et al. (2023), which show that harassment is often structured and patterned rather than isolated (Figure 10).

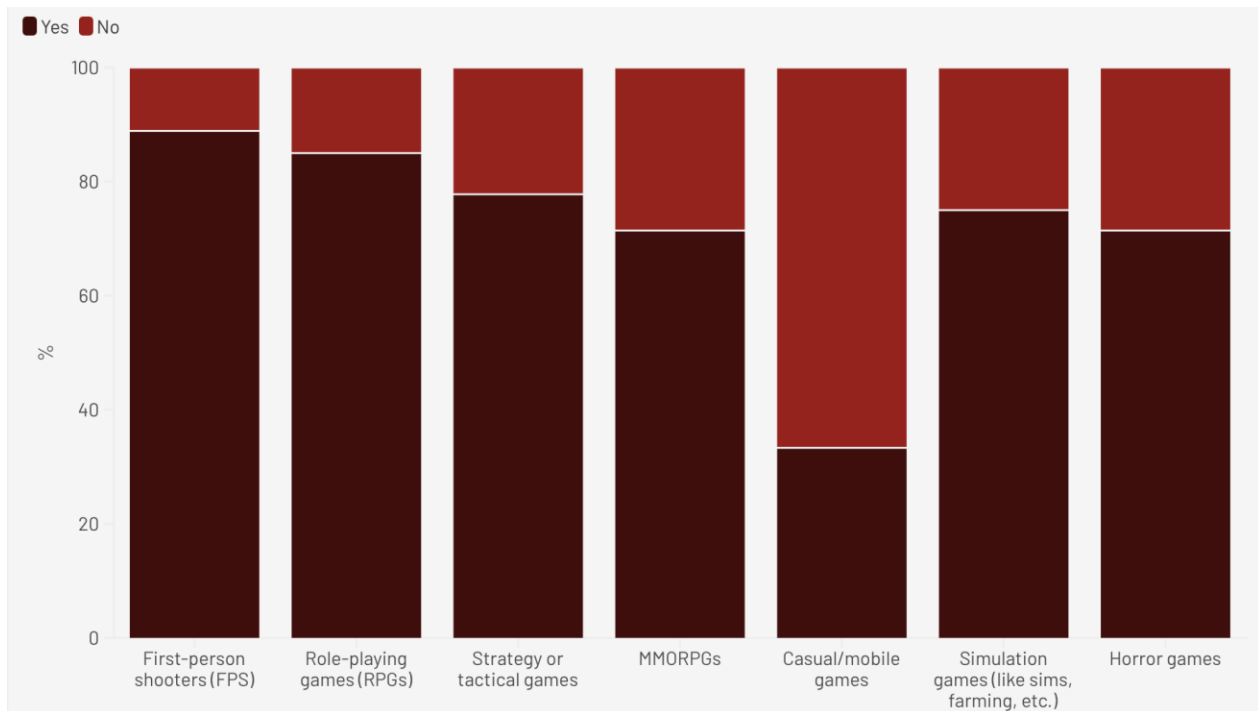


Figure 10. Experienced harassment, answer on Q11: “Have you experienced inappropriate or uncomfortable behaviour during gaming because of your gender?”

At the same time, participants described different social contexts in which they typically played:

- a) 41.7% mostly play solo;
- b) 30.6% play with a mix of people;
- c) 25% mostly play with real-life friends;
- d) Only 2.8% mostly play with online communities.

This distribution reflects a clear tendency toward controlled or limited social interaction, suggesting that many women prefer to reduce exposure to potentially unsafe public spaces in multiplayer games.

When asked whether they ever chose to hide their gender while gaming, 39% said “sometimes,” and 31% said “often”. That might mean turning off the mic, using a neutral

username, or simply staying quiet. This suggests that gender-masking is a common, adaptive response to structural toxicity, not simply a personal preference (Figure 11, 12).

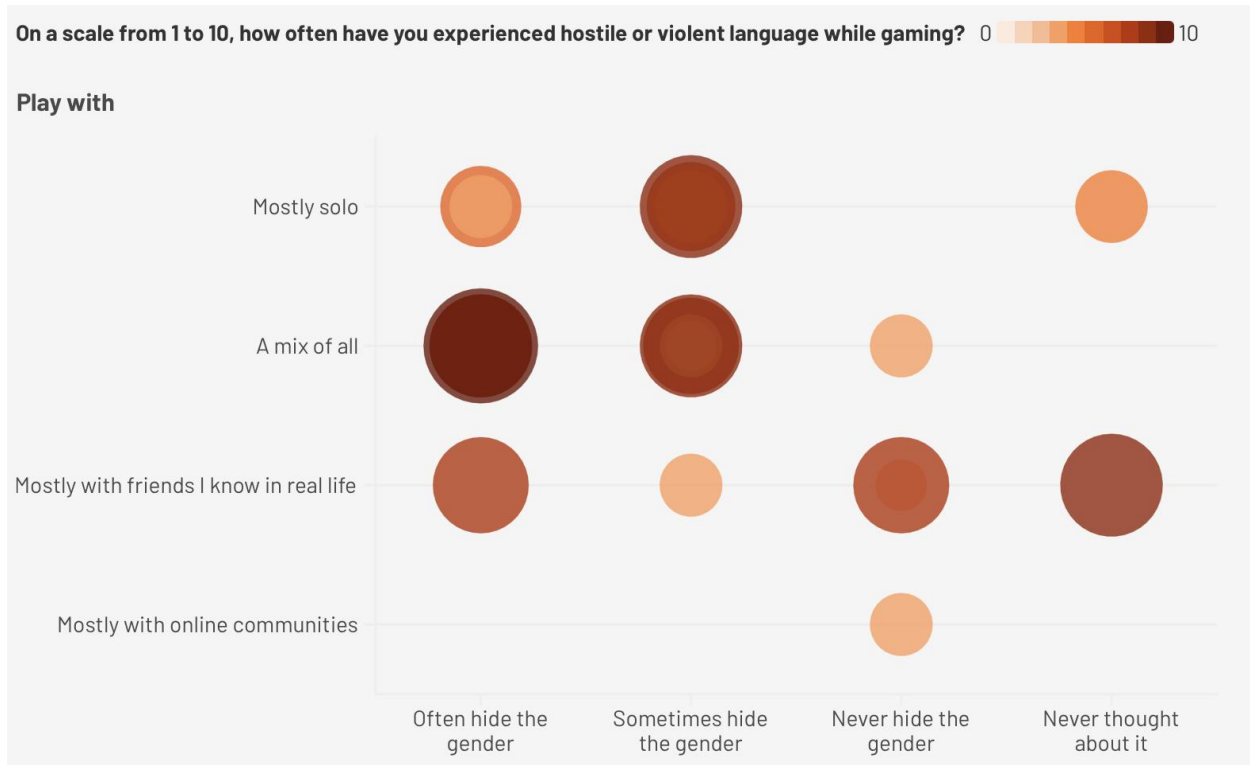


Figure 11. Frequency of gender-masking

These participants were also more likely to report higher exposure to hostile or violent language. A comparison of hostile language scores (1-10 scale) shows that those who frequently masked their gender tended to rate the hostility of language significantly higher than those who did not. The following graph illustrates the average rating of hostile or violent language depending on how often participants hid their gender.



Figure 12. Average hostile language score per masking category

This pattern supports Cote’s (2015) point that disclosing voice and identity is a risky act for women players, and many of them develop coping mechanisms, such as silence, performance, or avoidance, to remain in the space without fully being in it. One participant reflected:

“When gender is hidden and doesn’t need to be shown so nobody has to judge me by it”
(R21)

Another said:

“I can suppose there’s a lot of girls in gaming who are hiding their gender just as I do. If we were more open about it, guys wouldn’t be that surprised discovering that we exist lol.” (R31)

These reflections are not just personal tales. They are strategic, emotional responses to a platform culture in which gender is constantly re-read, tested and punished.

Despite the prevalence of hostility, 41.7% of respondents reported having participated in or found a supportive space for women in gaming, such as women-only guilds, Discord servers, or informal friend groups. Notably, all 15 participants who found such a space rated it positively, with a mean value of 3.9/5, and no one rating it below 4.

One respondent described:

“I joined new strong alliance, where most of deputies and leader were women from my country. They were really supportive even though I am a 100% free to play player, while they contributed money to this game and alliance heavily”. (R7)

It highlights how a supportive environment can disrupt these hierarchies. In contrast to competitive guilds, where productivity and cost often dictate status, emotional solidarity and inclusivity take precedence.

4.2 Visibility, Body Shame, and Gendered Policing

One of the most vivid emotional threads that runs through both the survey and the Reddit data is the discomfort that many women feel with the way the female body is represented, discussed, and critiqued in gaming culture. They are rooted in the long-standing design norms and aesthetic codes discussed in part 2.2 Reproducing Stereotypes: Gender in Game Design, where female characters are often reduced to decorations, fantasy objects, or sexual spectacle.

The survey participants mentioned the emotional discomfort they felt with the way women were depicted in games as a major obstacle that prevented them from feeling complete. This was a deeply personal reaction to bodies that seemed unreal, sexualised, or disconnected from their

own experience. One participant mentioned the recently released game *Stellar Blade*, which caused a negative reaction due to the hyper-feminised design of the main character:

“I still can’t grasp the over sexuality of female characters. Take Stellar Blade for example”. (R5)

Furthermore, respondents pointed to specific examples, linking discomfort directly to hypersexualisation:

“Add more realistic aspects of women's lives to games, as well as visualize stronger female characters without sexualizing them in the gaming industry.” (R30)

Words like “sexualised,” “unrealistic,” “ugly,” or “objectified” appeared across several answers. Such language signals speak to how representation builds emotional security. When femininity in games is read only through idealised or sexualised bodies, many players feel that there is no room for their own visibility.

To understand how these experiences are discussed publicly, I compared the emotional tone of Reddit threads related to character design across r/Gaming and r/GirlGamers. I focused on posts and comments coded under categories like *Body Shame Response*, *Validation of Realistic Bodies*, and *Problematic Sexualization*.

The contrast between r/Gaming and r/GirlGamers is dramatic. In r/Gaming, references to design and character representation are dominated by conceptual critiques of sexualisation, often in abstract or ironic tones, disconnected from personal experience. In contrast, the themes of

r/GirlGamers cover a much more varied emotional and experiential range, from direct reactions to body-shaming to the validation of realistic bodies, embodied testimonies, and the betrayal of safe spaces (Figure 13).

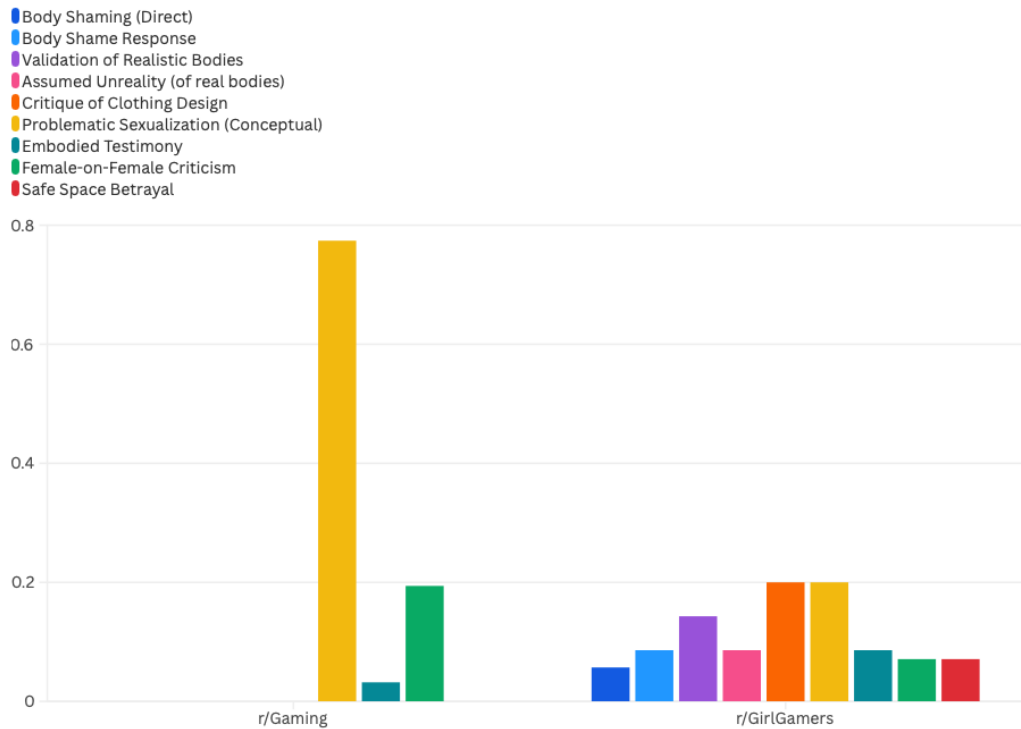


Figure 13. Stacked bar showing frequency of *Body Shame* tones by subreddit

In r/GirlGamers, body-related criticism often appears as a form of co-reflection or harm processing, where players speak from their own experience rather than detached criticism. Terms such as “my boobs look like that”, “sad tits”, or “not sexy” don’t just describe characters. They point to real players processing real shame triggered by the way bodies are discussed or portrayed in games. One Reddit user wrote:

“Yeah it was a bit hard reading some of those comments. I already feel like my breast shape isn’t sexy so seeing comments reaffirming that was... something.” (User7)

r/GirlGamers stands out as a space where personal testimony is not only welcomed but central, with over 60% of posts grounded in “I-based” narratives. This is a moment of embodied vulnerability that clashes with a platform culture that often treats body design as a joke or a design flaw. In spaces led by women, such reactions are shared and approved. In mainstream spaces, they are often muted or ironised in advance.

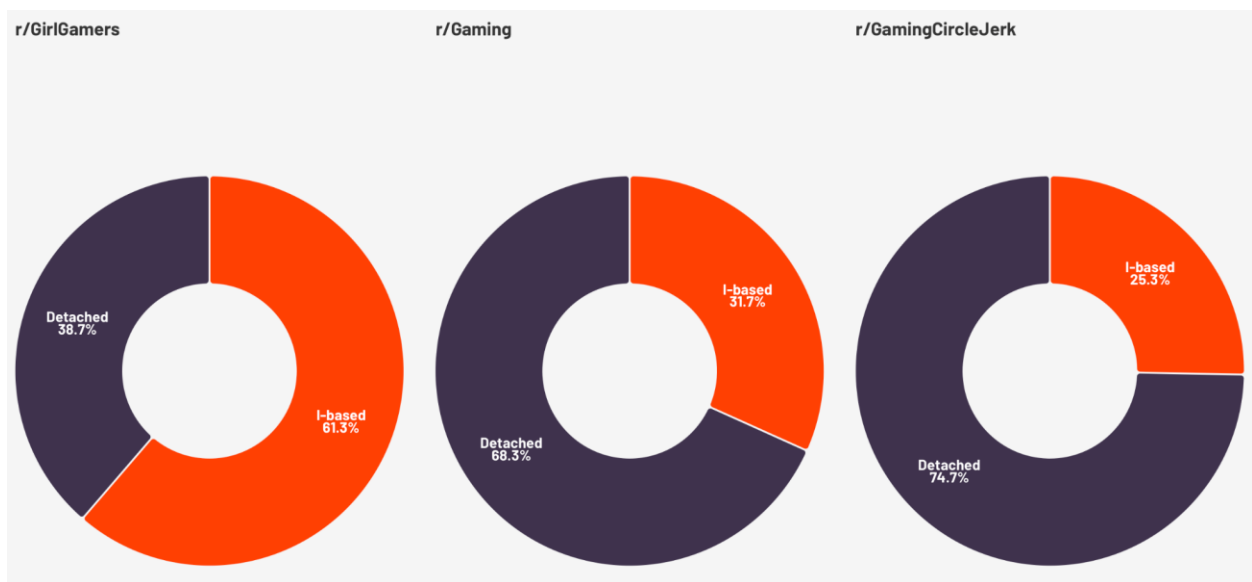


Figure 14. Distribution of “I-based” vs. “Detached” commentary across subreddits

By contrast, r/Gaming is marked by detachment (68.29%). The former often privileges generalised, supposedly “objective” critique of the industry, while the latter leans heavily on irony and abstraction.

But design is only part of the picture. Being visible, especially when your gender is made clear through your voice or username, easily leads to policing. Several participants said that they have been called "less qualified" or "annoying" after chatting:

“When I played alone with random allocated players, and because I didn’t save one of the players, he assumed I’m a girl. He tried to kick me off the game, but because I was second (after him) on the score sheet, the rest of the players voted against. Then just a classic gender based accusations and lang.” (R9)

“When I couldn't do something and I was judged because I was a woman and automatically played worse”. (R30)

Some tried to mask their gender to avoid this, while others did not, and faced outright exclusion or hyper-visibility. The result is a kind of forced performance, where women have to constantly monitor how much they reveal and to whom. This is linked directly to the literature on pseudonymity and gendered labour online (see part 2.3 Sexism, Harassment and the Culture of Toxic Play).

And this isn’t always limited to public spaces. Some participants described being stalked or persistently messaged after revealing their gender, even in supposedly safe or female-led communities.

“I’ve had an experience of stalking when I’ve had 14 cause I’ve said online I am a young girl”. (R26)

Despite this, many also shared examples of safety and support. Around 41.7% of respondents said they had found or participated in female-focused gaming spaces, such as guilds, Discord servers, or friend groups. They described them not only as enjoyable, but also as vital. Still, even these safer spaces were not always consistent, some respondents expressed disillusionment when internalised sexism appeared even there. This points to a more complex dynamic where visibility is negotiated not only across platforms, but within communities themselves.

In this case, gender visibility is moulded not only by the way characters are depicted, but also by the way communities react to those who challenge the standards. The emotional labour involved in navigating these dynamics is constant, through self-censorship, masking, or avoidance. And yet, many of these norms are imposed not through direct hostility, but through tone: sarcasm, irony, and a “it’s just a joke” energy.

4.3 Humour, Irony, and Cultural Gatekeeping

If visibility makes you vulnerable, humour often decides whether that vulnerability is accepted or ridiculed. Across both survey and Reddit data, humour emerges again and again: sometimes as a soft shield, sometimes as a weapon. In many online spaces, when gendered exclusion or objectification is raised, the response comes wrapped in humour: memes, sarcasm, irony, and dismissive “it’s just a joke”.

Humour is often framed as harmless. But what became clear in this study is that in gaming spaces, it also regulates: who is “funny” enough? Who is “too sensitive”? So this part explores

how humour functions as a double-edged tool: for some, a strategy of coping and resistance, for others, a shield for toxic discourse.

Several respondents wrote about sarcasm in voice chat or Discord being used to shut down complaints about sexist content, or to humiliate female players under the pretence “banter”.

“If you say anything about female designs, someone always says you’re overreacting or don’t get the joke.” (R13)

This kind of humour works as a social camouflage: it masks the exclusion in a show, so that if you criticise it, you risk being labelled too sensitive, humourless or “not funny”. Ideally, humour should challenge norms, mock the authorities, and break stereotypes. But in such cases, humour only pretends to be rebellious, while in reality it protects the status quo. For instance, it can be used to normalise objectification or ridicule those who stand up for equality.

In r/Gaming and r/GamingCircleJerk, this ironic tone is almost constant. At first glance, it looks critical, as these are sarcastic posts that mock the industry, bad design, or fake inclusivity campaigns. But if a closer look is taken, the objects of humour are often not systems, but people who dare to take these systems seriously.

Irony-as-Poison (r/GamingCircleJerk)	Irony-as-Shield (r/GirlGamers)
<p data-bbox="305 331 722 363">"This is a troll post right? 😏 it's 2023.."</p> <p data-bbox="264 390 751 443">Sarcasm to dismiss gender-based concerns as outdated</p>	<p data-bbox="865 331 1344 363">"Proud member of the saggy titty committee.."</p> <p data-bbox="870 390 1339 443">Sarcasm to mock body-shamers and express solidarity</p>
<p data-bbox="289 491 743 543">"I like sexualized women.. so sexualization is wrong?"</p> <p data-bbox="269 571 763 623">Sarcasm to discredit nuanced arguments about objectification</p>	<p data-bbox="870 491 1339 543">"Maybe it will be shocking to some, but I think many women's boobs would look like that.."</p> <p data-bbox="894 571 1315 623">Sarcasm about ignorance of natural body variation</p>
<p data-bbox="313 672 719 724">"Me when I find out most of the earth's population requires physical attraction.."</p> <p data-bbox="269 751 763 804">Sarcasm to discredit nuanced arguments about objectification</p>	<p data-bbox="894 672 1300 724">"When we said we wanted more pockets please, this is NOT what we meant!"</p> <p data-bbox="889 751 1320 804">Humorous jab at impractical outfit design</p>
<p data-bbox="313 852 711 905">"There are only two genders: male and political!!"</p> <p data-bbox="302 932 719 984">Sarcasm to ridicule gender discourse as unnecessary or annoying</p>	<p data-bbox="870 852 1325 905">"Y'all are saying her boobs look saggy.. So.. somehow.. representation??"</p> <p data-bbox="837 932 1357 984">Sarcasm to highlight how low the bar is for realism in female bodies</p>

Table 3. Quote table comparing two types of irony

In r/GirlGamers, sarcasm often plays a defensive role. Here, players use irony to cope with isolation or to unite through a shared frustration. The tone remains sharp, but the target changes: instead of making fun of marginalised players, sarcasm is directed at the absurdity of the system.

For many participants, humour is often a form of defence, to have a voice and the ability to criticise. A way to speak without fear of being punished for it, a form of emotional camouflage.

"Sometimes I joke about it first so no one else can". (R19)

It is labour. A form of constant self-regulation that requires productivity, mindfulness, time and an emotional cost that is rarely named. These tonal differences aren't just about individual

personalities. As discussed in part 2.5, Reddit, like many male-dominated spaces, tends to reward quick, punchy, ironic content. The karma system, visibility algorithms, and moderation practices all favour humour over vulnerability. Posts that seem too sincere, too reflective, or too feminist are often hidden or ignored.

This is particularly visible in tonal differences across subreddits. While r/GirlGamers frequently uses irony to name harm and survive it, other communities (especially r/Gaming and r/GamingCircleJerk) often use sarcasm to mock and shut down criticism.

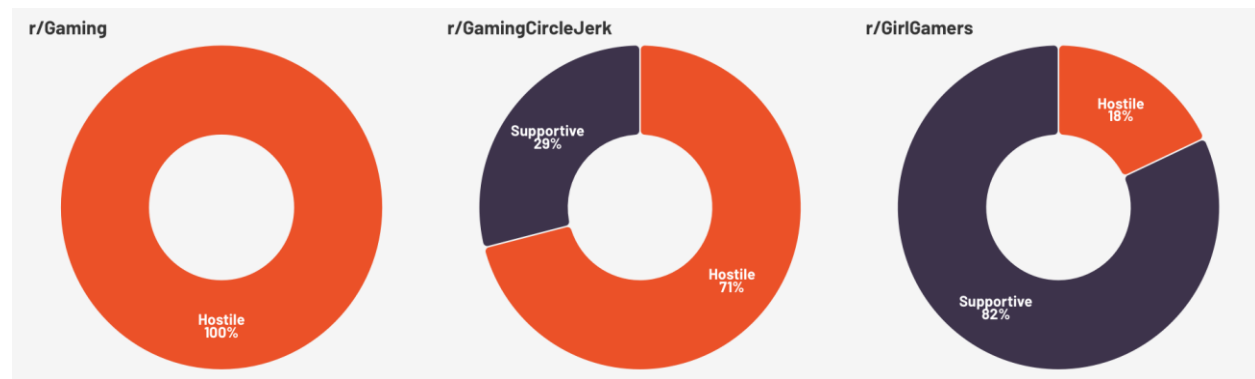


Figure 15. Proportion of Hostile vs Supportive tone in Humour/Sarcasm coded comments

The donut charts above illustrate this split: in r/Gaming, humour was 100% hostile. In r/GamingCircleJerk, over 70% of humorous comments carried a mocking or dismissive tone. In contrast, r/GirlGamers showed the reverse 82% of humorous posts also held a reflective, personal, or supportive tone. As Massanari (2015) puts it, Reddit’s “toxic technocultures” thrive not despite humour, but through it. Humour acts as an escape valve, allowing you to say the unspeakable and then deny it: “You weren’t offended, right? It was just a meme.”

Humour in gaming culture is structural, it determines how norms are applied, how discomfort is mocked, and who has the right to talk without being rejected. It decides whose

criticism is taken seriously and whose criticism is dismissed as too sensitive. As the next part shows, this has real consequences: it moulds not only narratives, but also silences.

4.4 Policy, Exclusion and Internal Conflict

While much of this research has focused on external forms of exclusion and toxicity, the r/GirlGamers subreddit revealed an unexpected but significant pattern: cases of women criticising other women. This internal tension (whether through subtle politics of tone or more outright accusations) complicates simplistic notions of solidarity. It suggests that even in spaces created for support, boundaries are drawn about who matters, who is accountable, and who says the right thing.

My coding framework did not include "internalised misogyny" at the outset. However, comments coded as Female-on-Female Critique are predominantly located within r/GirlGamers, often emerging in response to perceived violations of group norms. These include women expressing discomfort with character sexualisation, frustration about being stereotyped, or critiques that are seen as too emotional or political. Some comments expressed disappointment in women who were "too sensitive" or "too angry", these forms of in-group criticism also function as mechanisms of gatekeeping.

The chart below shows that r/GirlGamers was the primary site of such intra-group critique. Out of all comments coded with Female-on-Female Critique or Internalised Misogyny, 65.2% came from r/GirlGamers, compared to 26.1% in r/Gaming and just 8.7% in r/GamingCircleJerk.

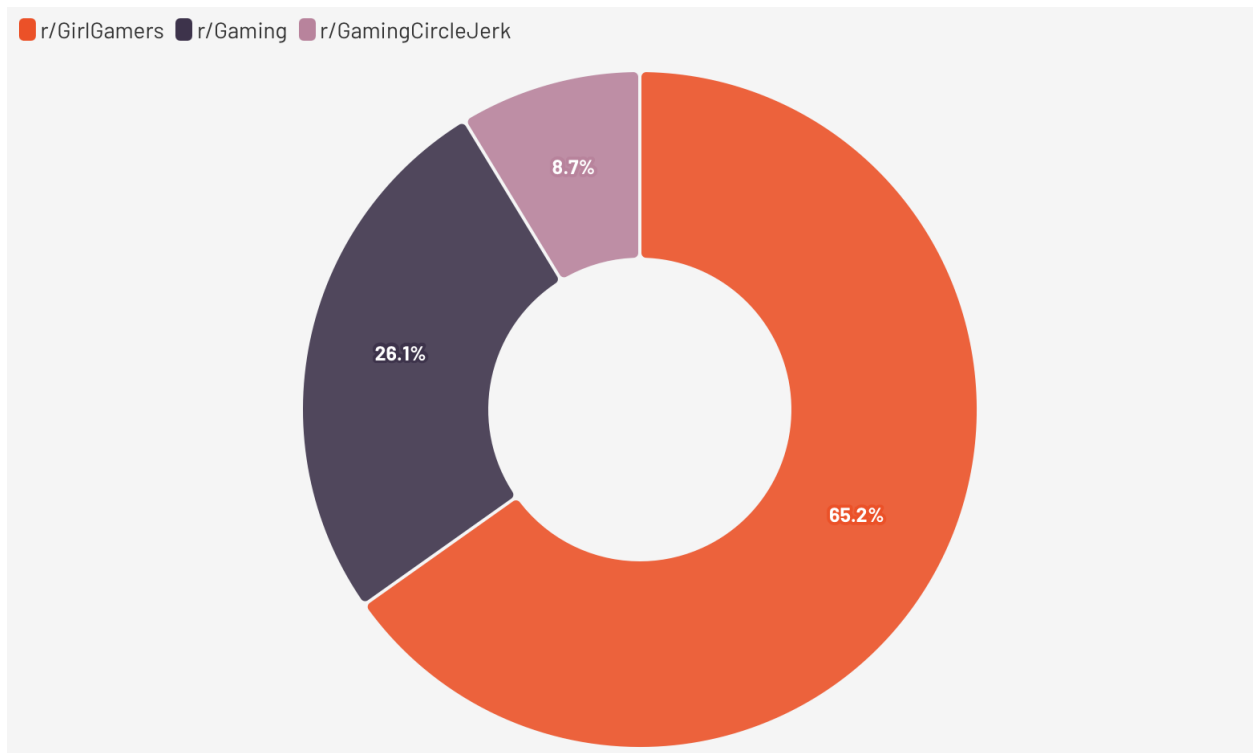


Figure 16. Proportion of comments coded as Female-on-Female

Another interesting finding of the Reddit analysis that I did not expect was the emotional weight given to the perceived betrayal in r/GirlGamers. It wasn't hostile outsiders trolling the community, but community members expressing concern about how quickly the space had become judgmental.

“I have heard enough bullshit about my less than perfect body from shitty men. I don't need to hear it in what I thought was a safe space.” (C117)

The expectation that a female-centric subreddit will naturally promote solidarity is powerful, but often unrealistic. For some users, the pain was not only caused by the body-shaming itself, but also by the person from whom it came. There is an implicit social contract in safe spaces:

we come here to be supported, not judged. So when there is criticism about appearance or tone, it is perceived not as a discussion, but as a betrayal.

“One of the reasons why I left this sub a long time ago was because of how extreme some people can get here.. Genuinely just makes me want to leave again.” (C17)

This sentiment is indicative of a wider phenomenon: people often expect unconditional support rather than critical reflection from safe spaces. As Sara Ahmed (2017) argues, feminist solidarity is not a seamless or inherently utopian project. The existence of tensions or moments of conflict within feminist movements indicates that inclusivity is not automatically achieved and that feminist spaces may not always meet their ideals.

Although the dataset did not contain the explicit phrase "not like other girls" many comments carried its emotional connotation, subtly distancing themselves from those that were perceived as too emotional, too political or too sensitive. This “cool girl” framework, which rewards detachment, conformity and performative coolness, has often been used to invalidate feminist critique or expression of discomfort.

“Hope u get picked 🙄” (C113)

“Aren’t you the cool girl trope in human form” (C117)

“Jesus Christ imagine wanting to get picked this badly” (C125)

“r/notlikeothergirls” (C127)

These responses ridicule others for seeking male validation, suggesting that not being like other girls is already a betrayal. However, while doing so, they reproduce another internal scenario – the one which still acts within the patriarchal logic. Instead of opening a dialogue or reflection, they close it with sarcasm, shame, and tone.

This is also a form of internalised misogyny: the commentary is not meant to explain or understand, but to delegitimise. Criticism becomes aggression, discomfort becomes an overreaction, and emotional expression becomes weakness. The contradiction speaks to the cool girl at the same time as being both offended and demanding. You shouldn't be like other girls, but if you do this too obviously, you will also be ridiculed.

Whether they are outwardly witty or playful, they function as a means of control, reinforcing a narrow vision of how a "real gamer girl" should behave: calm, carefree, apolitical. Anything else becomes a threat to the group's image.

On other hand, in r/Gaming and r/GamingCircleJerk, posts that raise gender issues are more likely to be dismissed or labelled as overly political. While in r/GirlGamers there are moments of negotiation over tone and belonging, here the response is much sharper: gendered concerns are often dismissed as “woke nonsense”, a phrase that itself has been memefied.

In fact, the entire flair category exists on these subreddits – “woke”, which signals that readers are being pushed to dismiss it as overly dramatic or unserious without digging deeper.

“Don’t you know that there are only two genders, male and political?!” (C201)

This form is what Sara Ahmed (2017) calls the “feminist killjoy” effect, where those who point out discomfort or exclusion are framed as the problem themselves. This is indicative of a

cultural mechanism of rejection: rather than addressing the essence of feminist arguments, these communities have developed shared vocabularies to delegitimise them in advance. The term “woke” becomes a label for silencing. As soon as someone starts talking about representation, or discomfort, or bias, the label is ready: “Ah, another woke take”.

4.5 Silencing and Platform Adaptations

Silence in the online space is often interpreted as a lack of interest or absence. However, silence is frequently created, sometimes forcibly, by the platform's features and the cultural scripts it promotes. As discussed earlier in this chapter, humour and emotional restraint function as social currency, not just as individual traits. Emotion, pain, even critique, are filtered through expectations about tone, humour, and what’s considered “worth” engaging with.

Reddit, like many social platforms, creates very specific conditions for this: the upvote system, pseudonymity and karma system. Reflective, emotional, or politically nuanced comments are often hidden, while short, sarcastic remarks rise to the top. This becomes clear in the data when comparing tones. The chart below illustrates that comments coded as Reflective/Personal or Fatigued/Tired consistently receive lower upvotes across all subreddits. While tones like Sarcastic/Ironic and Angry are more variable on r/Gaming and r/GamingCircleJerk.

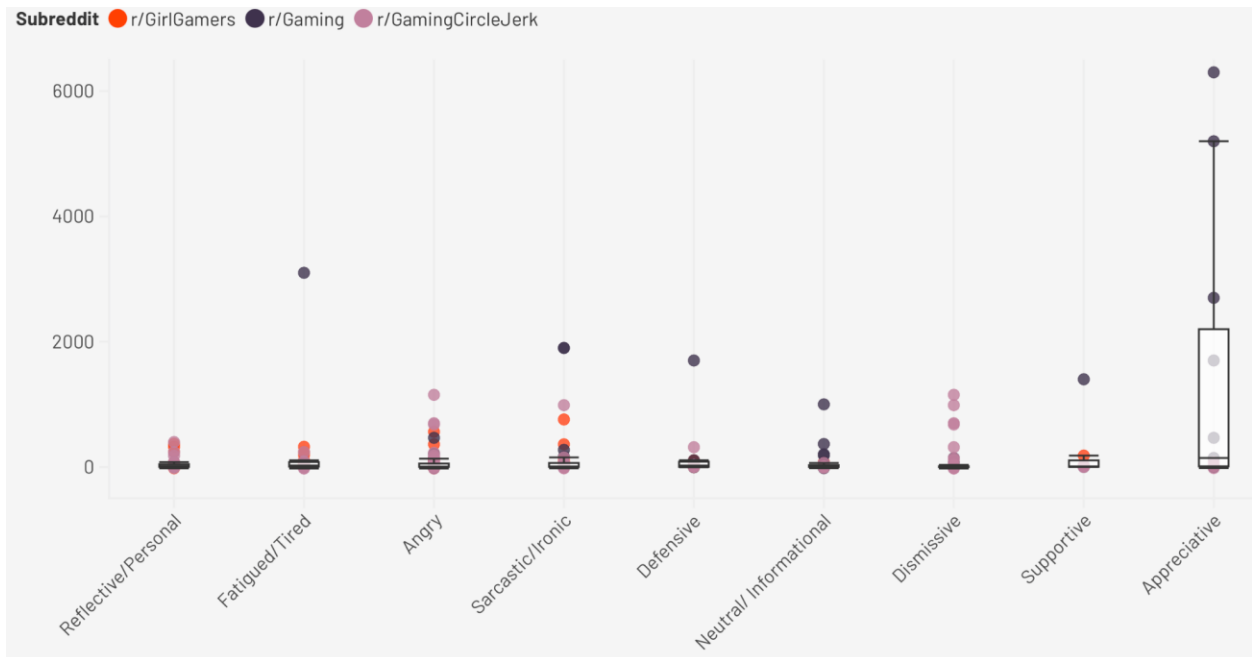


Figure 17. Upvotes by tone across subreddits

Most strikingly, approving comments show the largest vote spread, with several extreme values (up to 6,000 votes), especially in r/games. However, the last category is tricky: appreciative here does not mean thankful, but often signals the approval of sexist or dismissive comments, a sort of ironic celebration of toxicity. This suggests that sarcastic validation of misogyny can go viral, while emotionally vulnerable posts rarely exceed the visibility cap.

Reddit's architecture does not remove emotional language by demoting it. Comments that express discomfort or pain are often hidden, but not because they are unpopular, but rather because they do not fit the prevailing tone. And yet, visibility is not always proof. Reddit's controversial filter makes this point especially clear. There is a special 'controversial' item in the comments. This algorithmic tool identifies comments that receive both a lot of upvotes and a lot of downvotes simply because they are controversial. While this may seem neutral, this design feature implicitly encourages emotional conflict. As a result, painful or feminist statements often become popular

not because of support, but because of polarisation. They become points of eruption of disagreement rather than moments of shared reflection.

Tone matters, not only what you say, but also how you say it. In r/Gaming and r/GamingCircleJerk, sarcasm and disdain dominate. In r/GirlGamers, there is more space for the pain and support, and this space is regulated. Even in r/GirlGamers, comments that are perceived as too emotional or too angry face rejection. A reflective tone might be more acceptable there, although it is not immune to judgement. This suggests that tone police is not exclusive to male-dominated spaces. Feminised communities also have scripts about which expressions are allowed.

Reddit culture, in particular, thrives on controversy-as-engagement, creating an emotional environment where conflict is more algorithmically valuable than care. As I argued in Chapter 2.5, affordance theory helps reveal that design choices always more than just technical, even political. Features like karma, controversial ranking, or pseudonymity don't just structure user behaviour. They train users in specific emotional habits: when to perform, when to joke, when to stay silent.

In this context, visibility becomes a double-edged sword: to speak is to take a risk, and to remain invisible is to vanish. Silence, therefore, is the product of emotional control, where only certain kinds of expression survive the process of being presented.

4.6 Coping, Resistance and Community-Building

Despite the ever-present presence of harassment, bias, and platform-level wipes, many women adapt, resist, and build something new instead of just shutting down. Some respondents shared that they deliberately mask their gender, avoid voice chat, or adopt neutral usernames and avatars to reduce the risk of targeting. Others use humour or self-deprecation as a shield, trying to

“get ahead of the others” before they are mocked. This resonates with the “thick skin” mentality that was prevalent in both the survey and the Reddit data.

Not all reactions to hostility are open resistance. For many participants, coping took the form of emotional distancing, strategic silence, or technical adaptation. In other words, it can be described as saving energy in an environment that rarely rewards vulnerability.

One user described a pragmatic approach to unwanted attention:

"If someone turns out to be a creep I just block, report and move on enjoying my time... I don't want to hide from and fear some little scum... I'll just report it." (C76)

This reflects a general tension: many women are unaware of the violence, and yet they often recognise that confrontation is not worth the cost. The strategy becomes one of selective engagement by avoiding escalation while protecting space.

Others expressed resignation about toxicity as inevitable, even naturalised. One user wrote:

*"People are gonna be d*cks online. They should not go into a game expecting chivalry."*
(C85)

Another repeated this idea more sharply:

"Nature of the beast... Some people just don't understand banter, and others can't handle toxicity." (C92)

These quotes reveal a cultural narrative in which toxicity is viewed not as a bug, but as a feature. It seems to be something to adapt to, not to challenge. This resonates with the common advice found in both Reddit threads and interviews: mute, block, move on.

One male user even described his standard gaming routine as a total disconnect:

"First thing I do when I play any game online is mute myself and everyone else." (C93)

The underlying message of these responses is clear: "You just have to ignore it, otherwise you'll go crazy." Silence becomes a way of keeping sanity.

While mainstream gaming environments often isolate or exhaust women, many participants actively looked for or created alternatives. These were not always official policy efforts or large-scale campaigns. Frequently, they were small acts of protest: a private Discord group, a women-only guild, a subreddit where women could feel (at least temporarily) safe.

During the survey, participants were asked if they had ever found a space that supported women in gaming. The answers were revealing:

- a) 41.7% – yes;
- b) 44.4% – no;
- c) 13.9% weren't sure.

But here's what's noteworthy: among those who found such a space, its value was consistently high. On a scale of 1 to 5, the average score was 3.9, and 0 respondents rated it below 4. As the graph below shows, when safe spaces of support exist, they make a big impact.

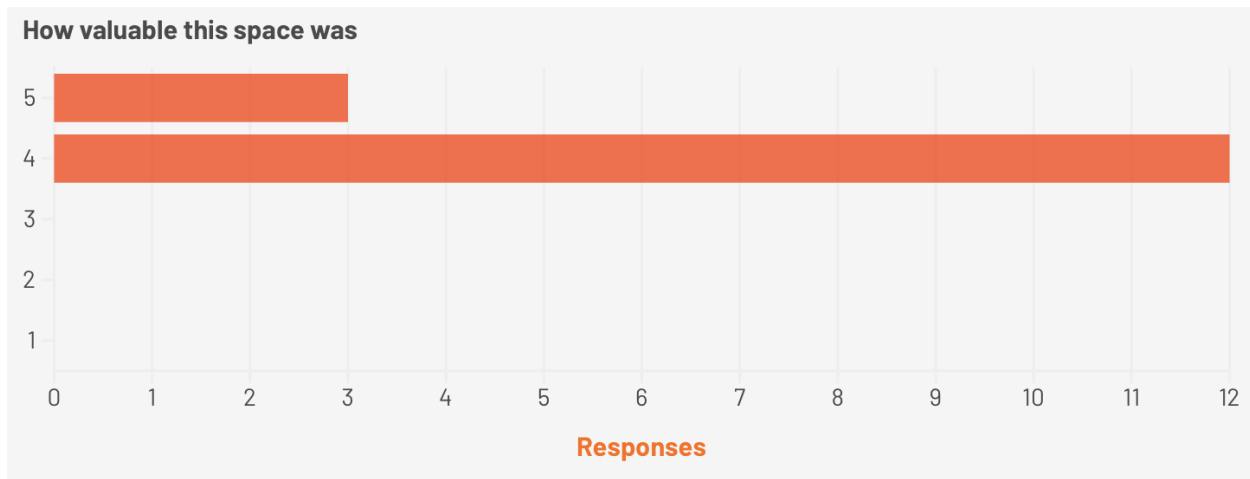


Figure 18. Supportive space value

These responses on question “In your opinion, what would help make gaming more inclusive for women and marginalised genders?” reflect more than just escapism:

“Making GCs or Discord to play with other women only.” (R1)

“We need games from women to women.” (R5)

“More people who support and protect women in games... so you can at least laugh at the situation and ignore it.” (R3)

These comments show the importance of emotional support, protection and shared humour as survival tools. They also highlight how the work of care is redistributed among women themselves, such as a kind of niche moderation and emotional gatekeeping where platforms do not work.

But even here, ambivalence remains. Internal criticism, tone policing, or the presence of “cool girls” can still creep in. Nevertheless, these findings make it clear that the desire for community is resilient, and the work of creating it continues.

Conclusion

This dissertation aims to explore how sexism exists in gaming communities. Specifically, not only as isolated cases of harassment, but as part of broader cultural, historical and technological frameworks that shape community engagement, voice and belonging. Based on feminist theory and the lived experiences of women gamers, the research highlights how digital gaming spaces continue to reproduce gender inequalities, moreover, often through mechanisms that appear neutral, playful, or just part of the culture.

This study addressed four main research questions. Firstly, it examined the historical and cultural construction of gaming as a male-dominated space and showed how early advertising, platform history, and narrative tropes continue to influence social norms. Secondly, specific forms of gender harassment faced by women, such as verbal abuse, stereotyping, and removal from multiplayer spaces, were identified, as demonstrated by both survey data and Reddit threads. Thirdly, the research analysed how gender stereotypes and toxic behaviours are reinforced in meme culture and dismissive comments, and how they are sometimes challenged and subverted by feminist action. Finally, it evaluated how female gamers respond to the dynamics of exclusion, revealing strategies such as code-switching, leaving, collective resistance, and creating safer community spaces such as r/GirlGamers.

The project also demonstrated the advantages of integrating survey results with digital empirical research. By employing a mixed-methods approach, it was possible to capture both the personal emotional impacts of exclusion and the wider discursive patterns that normalise it. While previous research has examined sexism in games, this study contributes by focusing on the voices of female gamers themselves and demonstrating how the platform's infrastructure actively shapes their experiences. This perspective remains underexplored in research on games and platforms.

Clear patterns appear to emerge from survey responses and analysis of Reddit threads: female gamers regularly experience casual and open sexism, being forced to remain silent or self-regulate, and often feeling the need to either overstep their competence or quit gaming altogether. Nevertheless, these patterns represent more than just behavioural ones. They are structured by platform design, community norms, and long-standing narratives that frame gaming as a default male activity. Specific conditions such as Reddit's karma system, the privileging of certain affective tones (sarcasm, irony), and the invisibility of emotional labour contribute to a digital culture where feminist discourse is either suppressed, ridiculed, or met with hostility.

At the same time, this study does not view women as passive recipients of the harm. The participants also demonstrated activism in the form of resistance, refusal and rethinking. Their actions, from creating niche, supportive spaces to strategically changing the code or distancing themselves, reflect complex conversations in an environment that is often ambivalent at best. The case of r/GirlGamers, for example, illustrates how even safe spaces are marked by internal tensions that reflect deeper struggles around authenticity, legitimacy, and what it means to be a gamer under the gaze of both patriarchy and platform.

This project encourages a serious consideration of the everyday, often routine ways in which gender power operates in gaming culture, and how these dynamics are encoded in platform architectures, community expectations, and cultural memory. Acknowledging these relationships is essential for designing more inclusive spaces and recognising the emotional, intellectual and creative labour of those who continue to play games despite the obstacles.

Games should not remain intolerant of otherness. At the same time, meaningful change will require more than representation or zero-tolerance policies. It means rethinking who has the right to speak, who is heard, and what kinds of play are considered valuable.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Survey Questionnaire

Thanks for being here.

This survey is about your experience as a woman in gaming. I'm doing this as part of an academic project to understand how gaming spaces shape women's participation, sense of belonging, and day-to-day experiences.

Your answers are **anonymous**, and you can skip any question if it doesn't feel right to answer. Just share as much (or as little) as you're comfortable with. Every response helps!

0. What is your gender?

- Woman
- Man *the survey will close, this research focuses on women's experiences in gaming*
- Prefer to self-describe: _____
- Prefer not to say *the survey will close, this research focuses on women's experiences in gaming*

Not Eligible

Thank you for your interest in this survey. This research is currently focused on the experiences of women in gaming. Your time is appreciated!

Part 1: Introduction

1. How old are you?

- Under 18 *the survey will close automatically, as this research is only for participants aged 18 and over*
- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55+

2. Where do you currently live? *helps understand geographic and cultural context without asking directly about migration*

- Ireland (I have lived here most of my life)
- Ireland (I moved here within the last 5 years)
- Another European country
- Outside of Europe
- Prefer not to say

Not Eligible

Thank you for your interest in this survey. This research is currently focused on adult women aged 18 and over. Your time is appreciated!

Part 2: Gaming background

3. Which types of games do you play most often? (Select all that apply) *Checkboxes*

- First-person shooters (FPS)
- Role-playing games (RPGs)
- Strategy or tactical games
- MMORPGs
- Casual/mobile games
- Simulation games (life sims, farming sims, etc.)
- Horror games
- Other (please specify):_____

4. How often do you play games?

- Every day
- A few times a week
- A few times a month
- Rarely

5. Who do you usually play with?

- Mostly solo (I usually play alone, even in games that have multiplayer) *go to 5a*
- Mostly with friends I know in real life
- Mostly with online communities
- A mix of all
- I don't currently play multiplayer games *go to Q5a*

Conditional follow-up (only shown if participant selects “Mostly solo” or “I don’t currently play multiplayer games”)

5a. Do you still participate in any gaming-related online communities or spaces? (e.g., watching streams, being part of Discord servers, commenting on Reddit, etc.)

- Yes
- No *the survey will close*

Not Eligible

Thank you for your interest in this survey. This research is currently focused on the experiences of women who actively engage with online gaming spaces or communities. Your time is appreciated!

Part 3: Gaming and community experience

- 6. Have you ever helped manage or moderate a gaming-related community?** (e.g., *Discord server, Reddit thread, guild, private server, forum, etc.*)
- Yes, in an official role (moderator, admin, etc.)
 - Yes, informally (e.g., helped organize things, resolve issues)
 - No
- 7. What do you enjoy most about gaming?** (Open-ended)
- 8. Have you ever participated in or found a supportive space for women in gaming** (e.g., Discords, communities, events)?
- Yes
 - No
 - I’m not sure
- 9. How valuable was this space for you?** (1 = Not valuable at all, 5 = Extremely valuable)
- 10. Have you ever chosen to hide your gender while playing** (e.g., using a neutral name, avoiding voice chat)?
- Yes, often
 - No
 - Sometimes
 - I’ve never thought about it

Part 4: Gendered experiences

11. Have you experienced inappropriate or uncomfortable behaviour during gaming because of your gender?

- Yes *go to Q1a*
- No *go to Q2*
- Prefer not to say

10a. What forms of behaviour have you encountered? *Only shown if Q1 = Yes*

- Sexist jokes or language
- Sexual harassment or comments
- Being ignored or talked over
- Assumptions that I'm less skilled because I'm a woman
- Doxxing, stalking, or threats
- Other (please specify)

12. On a scale from 1 to 10, how often have you experienced hostile or violent language while gaming? (1 = Never, 10 = Very frequently)

13. Do you think your gender affects how others treat you in gaming communities?

- Yes, in mostly *negative* ways
- Yes, in mostly *positive* ways
- Sometimes both
- No difference
- Not sure

Part 5: Stories & solutions

14. What's one moment when you felt especially welcomed, supported, or empowered in gaming?

15. What's one moment when you felt excluded or targeted because of your gender?

16. In your opinion, what would help make gaming more inclusive for women and marginalised genders?

End

Thank you so much for taking the time to complete this survey. Your input is incredibly valuable and helps shed light on the real experiences of women in gaming.

If you're looking for **safe** or **inclusive** spaces in gaming, here are a few great communities to check out:

[the*gamehers](#)

[r/GirlGamers on Reddit](#)

Appendix B: Codebook for Thematic Analysis

Code	Definition	Example
Body Shaming (Direct)	Comments that directly judge, insult, or mock a character's body shape or physical features.	"those are the saddest tits I've ever seen."
Body Shame Response	Comments from users expressing personal feelings of insecurity, hurt, sadness, or disappointment due to the body-shaming comments made by others.	"only to see a lot of comments like that that only made me feel worse about my own body :/"
Critique of Clothing Design	Comments focusing specifically on the unusual, impractical, or aesthetically unpleasing design of a character's outfit, distinct from critiques of their body shape.	"what was bugging me that I THOUGHT people would be talking about was the 'boob sock/sleeve' design"
Validation of Realistic Bodies	Comments affirming that a depicted body shape is realistic, normal, or expressing appreciation for its representation as a deviation from common unrealistic portrayals.	Plenty of breasts look like that. I was pleasantly surprised to see breasts that weren't the typical "perfect" round and perky ones you'd expect in a game like that."
Assumed Unreality (of real bodies)	Comments suggesting that some people perceive realistic body shapes as "unrealistic," "made up," or "unbelievable" due to societal conditioning, lack of real-world exposure, or adherence to idealized norms.	"Me, with tuberous breasts seeing people say this doesn't look real 😞 "
Embodied Testimony	Comments where users share their personal experiences, physical characteristics, or specific body types to relate to, validate, or refute claims about character designs or body representation.	"Proud member of the saggy titty committee chiming in to say f*ck these women in particular"
Safe Space Betrayal	Comments expressing disappointment, shock, or a sense of violation when a community or subreddit, previously perceived as inclusive, supportive, or "safe" for women/females, exhibits toxic or misogynistic behavior.	"The amount of toxic body shaming in tesponse was not what I expected for this subreddit."
Community Standards/Moderation Critique	Comments criticizing the general behavior allowed within the community, the perceived lack of moderation, or the community's tolerance for hostile or harmful discourse.	"I'm shocked the mods have allowed that to stay up, its genuinely hurtful to people in our own community."

Online Gaming Environment & Harassment	Comments discussing the broader experiences of women (or sometimes men) in online gaming spaces, including hiding gender, facing sexual harassment, discrimination, unwanted attention, or contrasting experiences based on perceived gender.	"If someone turns out to be a creep I just block, report and move on enjoying my time. I don't want to hide from and fear some little scum trying to flirt and ask for pics or tell me to go make him a sandwich"
Critique of Game Industry Character Representation	Broader criticisms of how female characters (or sometimes male) are generally portrayed in games, including lack of diverse body types, unrealistic beauty standards, "child faces," or being reduced to stereotypes.	"I genuinely don't play a lot of the games because of they way women are portrayed on them - it's just so annoying"
Forced Male Protagonist/Lack of Female Protagonists	Comments expressing dissatisfaction or frustration with the prevalence of default male protagonists, the limited options for playing as female characters, or the lack of interesting and diverse female leads.	"My interest in a game drops considerably when there's a forced male protagonist character."
Problematic Sexualization (Conceptual)	Comments discussing the deeper issues with sexualization in media, particularly when it leads to objectification, reduction of characters to mere sexual objects, or perpetuates harmful stereotypes. This often distinguishes between 'sexy' and 'objectified.'	"The problem with a female sex object isn't "female" or "sex", but object. It's just bad writing to have a character lacking in personality, agency or, you know, character."
Acceptable/Positive Sexualization	Comments that express a preference for or acceptance of sexualized or attractive characters, or argue that sexualization is not inherently problematic, especially when it coexists with agency, power, or is applied to all genders.	"I absolutely love sexy men and women in games. My issue is if the female characters are ONLY able to be played as sexy."
Cultural Context/Developer Intent	Comments attempting to explain or defend design choices by referencing cultural norms, developer's intentions, use of real models, or the nature of the character (e.g., android).	"I mean she is an android"
General Toxicity/Gamer Culture Critique	Broader comments about the toxic aspects of "gamer" culture, gatekeeping, misogynistic attitudes in the wider gaming community, or generalized negative observations about common gamer behaviors and mindsets. This also includes direct attacks on other commenters or the original poster using slurs or dismissive language.	"Grow up... "sexism" my god you have to have thin skin to bitch about this."
Humor/Sarcasm	Comments that use humor, irony, or sarcasm, often to make a point, mock a viewpoint, or express exasperation in a lighthearted or cutting way.	"Duh Crash is already sexy, why can't women look like him"
Game Quality/Gameplay Discussion	Comments that primarily focus on the technical aspects of the game (graphics, shaders, engine), gameplay mechanics, story quality, or overall game enjoyment/value, rather than explicitly on character representation issues. (These might be excluded	"but awful game? idk, it tries to be nier bit too hard while being way less interesting, but it plays well."

	depending on the precise scope of your analysis.)	
Female-on-Female Criticism	Comments where women themselves appear to uphold or contribute to misogynistic standards against other women, or express disappointment in other women for doing so. This is about women perpetuating harmful norms.	"And women aren't excused for upholding shitty norms."
Gender Fatigue	Comments expressing weariness, exhaustion, or frustration with recurring gender-based issues, debates, or stereotypes within gaming contexts.	"I genuinely don't play a lot of the games because of the way women are portrayed on them - it's just so annoying"

Appendix C: Ethical Documents



Ethical Approval Memorandum

To: Yana Yushchenko (researcher)
Conor Kostick (supervisor)

From: Research Ethics Committee at the Faculty of Journalism & Media Communications, Griffith College

Date: 27/05/2025

Dissertation Title: Sexism in the Gaming Industry: Inside and Out

The Research Ethics Committee at the Faculty of Journalism & Media Communications has approved this study. Decisions made by the Committee are collective, with collective responsibility.

Please note that this approval applies only to the procedures outlined in your submission. Any departure from these must be discussed with the supervisor, and may require additional ethical approval.

The committee wishes you every success with your research.

On behalf of the faculty's Research Ethics Committee

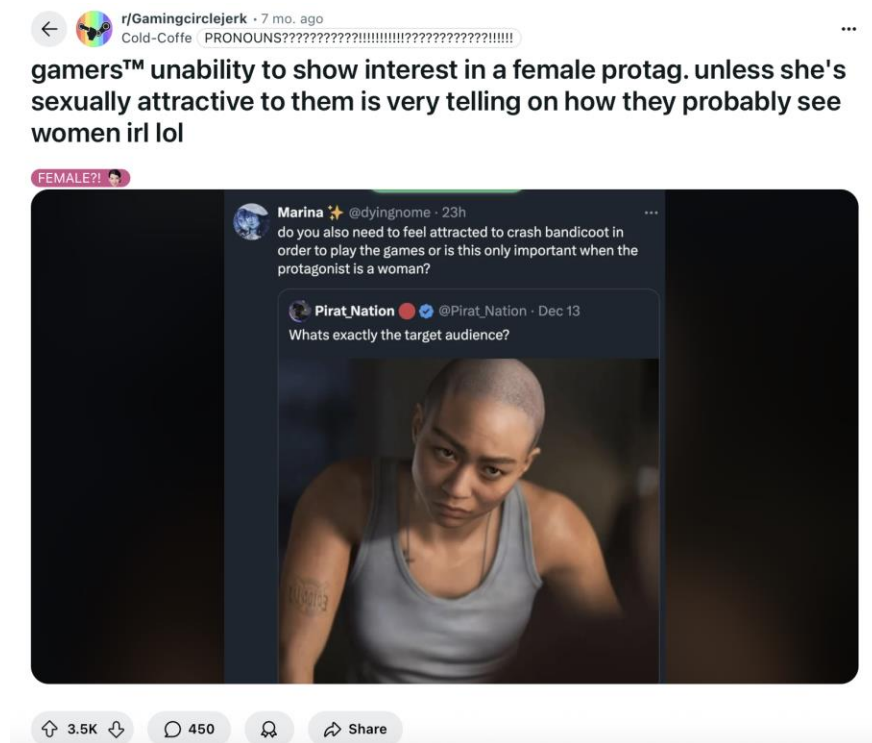
A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Barry Finnegan'.

Barry Finnegan (chair).

Appendix D: Sample Reddit Posts Used in Content Analysis

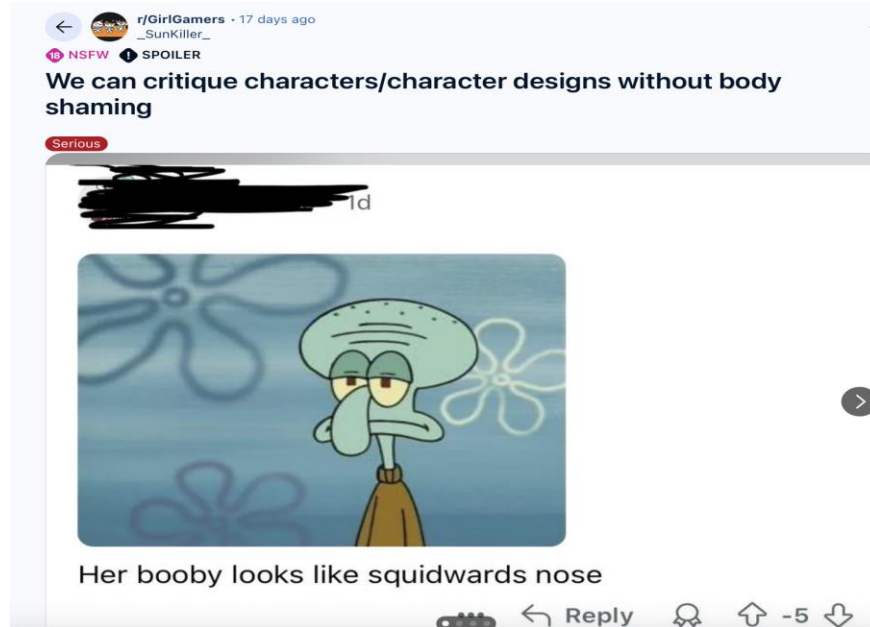
Subreddit: r/GamingCircleJerk

This post is an example of how female users use humour to ridicule sexist expectations in games. They purposely exaggerate the style (gags, sarcasm) to make the absurdity obvious. This is typical of the r/GamingCircleJerk subreddit, where irony is the main language of resistance. Such a post illustrates well the theme of “tone as a tool of resistance”, which I analyse in part 4.3.



Subreddit: r/GirlGamers

What makes this post important is the emotional labour that went into exposing such patterns in the community. The post expresses discomfort not only with the comment itself, but also with its initial popularity by showing how the dynamics of a platform (voting) can instantly reward shame. This illustrates a key theme from Section 4.4 on in-group tensions and internalised misogyny, as well as Section 4.2 on shame and body visibility.



Subreddit: r/Gaming

The author reflects on the constant need to mask gender in gaming spaces, describing the move from openness to strategic invisibility after repeated harassment. This post is an important example of Section 4.6 on coping and strategic silencing, as well as Section 4.2 on visibility and emotional risks. It highlights that emotional safety is not only a personal issue, but also a collective adaptation to platform norms.



Appendix D: Descriptive Statistics Tables

Interview

Demographics of respondents

Age	
18-24	48%
25-34	38%
35-44	5%
Prefer not to say	3%
Location	
Another European country	58%
Outside of Europe	25%
Ireland (I moved here within the last 5 years)	8%
Ireland (I have lived here most of my life)	6%
Prefer not to say	3%
Have you ever helped manage or moderate a gaming-related community?	
No	67%
Yes, informally	22%
Yes, in an official role	11%
How often do you play games?	
Every day	44%
A few times a week	33%
A few times a month	11%
Rarely	8%
Who do you usually play with?	
Mostly solo (I usually play alone, even in games that have multiplayer)	41.7%
A mix of all	30.6%

Mostly with friends I know in real life	25%
Mostly with online communities	2.8%

Most frequently mentioned game genres

Which types of games do you play most often?	Responses	
First-person shooters (FPS)	26	36%
Role-playing games (RPGs)	47	65%
Strategy or tactical games	24	33%
MMORPGs	32	44%
Casual/mobile games	27	38%
Simulation games (life sims, farming sims, etc.)	27%	38%
Horror games	22%	31%
Other (please specify): _____	12%	17%

Hypothesis

Hypothesis: Certain game genres (e.g., FPS) might be associated with a higher incidence of inappropriate behavior.	
Play FPS	Inappropriate Behavior
r3	Yes
r8	Yes
r10	Yes
r15	Yes
r16	Yes
r24	Yes

r25	
r26	Yes
r30	Yes
r32	Yes
r36	No

Correlation an inappropriate behavior with the style of play and genre

Inappropriate behavior	First-person shooters (FPS)	Role-playing games (RPGs)
Yes	13	17
No	1	2
All	14	19

Inappropriate behavior	A mix of all	Mostly solo (I usually play alone, even in games that have multiplayer)	Mostly with friends I know in real life	Mostly with online communities
Yes	83%	64%	83%	100%
No	17%	36%	16%	0

Types of gender-based harassment and frequency of gender masking

Type of Harassment	% of Participants	Responses
Sexist jokes or language	64%	30
Sexual harassment or comments	43%	20
Being ignored or talked over	40%	19
Assumptions that I'm less skilled because I'm a woman	83%	39
Doxxing, stalking, or threats	26%	12

Other	55%	26
Gender Masking Behaviour	% of Respondents	Responses
Yes, often	31%	18
Sometimes	39%	23
No	17%	10
I've never thought about it	14%	8

Supportive spaces

Have you ever participated in or found a supportive space for women in gaming?		
No		44%
Yes		42%
I'm not sure		14%
How valuable was this space for you?		
Not valuable at all		0
2		0
3		0
4		12
5		3
Mean		3.9

Hostile Language Rating by Masking Frequency

Gender Masking Behaviour	Avg. Hostility Score (1–10)	Standard Deviation
Yes, often	7.2	1.4
Sometimes	6.5	1.7
No	4.8	1.9
Never thought about it	4.2	1.2

Content Analysis

Number of comments

Thread ID	Number of comments
T01	19
T02	30
T03	26
T04	25
T05	29
T06	28
T07	32
T08	20
T09	31
All:	240
r/GirlGamers	75
r/Gaming	82
r/GamingCircleJerk	83

Code Frequency by Subreddit

Code	r/Gaming	r/GamingCircleJerk	r/GirlGamers
Acceptable/Positive Sexualization	13	0	3
Assumed Unreality (of real bodies)	0	0	6
Body Shame Response	0	0	6

Body Shaming (Direct)	0	2	4
Community Standards/Moderation Critique	0	0	2
Critique of Clothing Design	0	0	14
Critique of Game Industry Character Representation	13	6	34
Critique of Game Industry Practices (General)	17	17	0
Cultural Context/Developer Intent	0	0	8
Embodied Testimony	1	7	6
Female-on-Female Criticism	6	0	5
Forced Male Protagonist/Lack of Female Protagonists	0	2	10
Game Quality/Gameplay Discussion	2	1	5
Gender Fatigue	1	0	1
General Toxicity/Gamer Culture Critique	28	51	9
Humor/Sarcasm	1	7	11
Online Gaming Environment & Harassment	20	13	1
Problematic Sexualization (Conceptual)	24	2	14
Safe Space Betrayal	0	0	5
Validation of Realistic Bodies	0	0	10

Tone x Subreddit

Tone	r/GirlGamers	r/Gaming	r/GamingCircleJerk	Total
Supportive	6	2	1	9
Sarcastic/Ironic	15	17	21	53
Hostile	23	45	48	116
Reflective	18	9	10	37

Distribution of “Angry” tone x subtypes

	Angry		Angry, Dismissive	Defensive, Angry	Reflective/Personal, Angry
r/GirlGamers	42	49%	7%	100%	50%
r/Gaming	19	22%	43%		28%
r/GamingCircleJerk	25	29%	50%		21%

Emotional tone categories

	Defensive+supportive	Neutral
r/GirlGamers	45%	34%
r/Gaming	25%	38%
r/GamingCircleJerk	30%	28%