Grounds for Coping: When and Why Women Gamers Employ Different Harassment Management Strategies

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INTRODUCTION

As a field, Esports is predominantly populated by male video game players (Hilbert 2019). This is in direct contradiction to more general gaming trends, where women make up 46% of players and where the gap between genders has greatly reduced over the last decade (Statista 2023). There is a documented difference in the gender makeup between gaming and esports, suggesting the existence of additional barriers to enter competitive space for women (Taylor, 2012). This study thus examines the role of harassment or trash-talk in esports, which significantly affects women gamers (e.g. Cote, 2020; Fox and Tang, 2017). In result, women lack social support in gaming spaces (McLean and Griffiths, 2019), which increases obstacles to reach competitive ground. Most extant esports studies are focused on straight male esports players; as gaming diversifies, more research is needed concerning how female players are motivated to express themselves when gaming and which factors influence their choice in adopting strategies to best position themselves in this digital playground.

This study focuses on the psychological and social identity factors that influence the adoption of coping mechanisms while playing online video games. Using a survey, we build off previous work (e.g. Adinolf and Turkay, 2018; Cote, 2020; Fox and Tang, 2017) into women's coping mechanisms for managing in-game harassment– leaving online space, avoiding playing with strangers, camouflaging gender, deploying skills and expertise, and adopting aggressive personas. We classify these strategies into two categories– avoidance strategies that work to dodge or minimize harassment and participatory strategies that directly engage harassment– to investigate the circumstances under which a player might turn to one approach over another. Understanding the mechanisms behind a player's coping approach could help individuals and game designers account for negativity and build better tools to support gaming communities.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Self-Efficacy

Previous research related to gender and esports outlines three major themes: issues of the construction of masculinity, online harassment, and negotiation of gendered expectations (Rogstad 2022). Games have long been masculinized, perceived outsiders tend to face increased judgment and exclusionary harassment. We predict, however, that individuals with different levels of self-efficacy will respond differently to these forms of exclusion. Self-efficacy (Bandura 1977) is a factor that predicts individuals' beliefs and judgments to adopt a particular mechanism, proven to be successful in intent and actual action (Ajzen 1991). According to Bandura (1977), four variables contribute to one's sense of self-efficacy: performance accomplishments, vicarious experience, verbal persuasions, and emotional arousal, suggesting (in)competence and (un)controllability over the situation. We anticipate female gamers with higher self-efficacy will feel more equipped to deal directly with negativity:

H1a: High level of self-efficacy is positively related to participatory strategies.
H1b: Low level of self-efficacy is positively related to avoidance strategies.

Gamer Identification

Social Identity Theory suggests that individuals identify themselves based on group participation and social categories (Tajfel and Turner 2004). The concept of gamer identification was examined in previous studies to define differences between general and professional gamers (Ćwil and Howe 2020; Kowert et al. 2012). However, the extent to which gamer identity is associated with coping mechanisms still needs further examination. We predict that those who identify more with insider/gamer identities will feel more equipped to deal with harassment. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H2a. High level of gamer identification is positively related to participatory strategies.
H2b. Low level of gamer identification is positively related to avoidance strategies.

Furthermore, this study aims to examine the extent self-efficacy can influence gamer identification. The extent of gamer identification may increase the perceived self-efficacy of participants and influence their ability to adopt various strategies to negotiate space. Therefore, we expect gamer identification to play a mediating role between self-efficacy and adopted strategies.

H3a. High level of self-efficacy is positively related to high gamer identification.
H3b. High gamer identification mediates the relationship of self-efficacy and participation strategies.
H3c. Low gamer identification mediates the relationship of self-efficacy and avoidance strategies.

Reporting Tools

Some prior research suggests that reporting tools in online gaming environments positively impact community behavior by reducing toxicity (Lin 2013; Pohjanen 2018). Other scholars, however, found that reporting tools or systems are ineffective (Blackburn and Kwak 2014; Cote 2018). Examining the ease of use and effectiveness of reporting tools could provide insight into constructing safer online spaces and be a motivational factor for adopting different strategies. Thus, the following hypotheses are suggested:

H4a. Reporting tools perceived to be easy and effective to use are positively related to participatory strategies.
H4b. Reporting tools perceived not to be easy and effective to use are positively related to avoidance strategies.

METHODOLOGY

This study will distribute an online survey.

Sample

The targeted population are female video game players. Participants will be entered to win one of 100 twenty-five dollar gift cards from a lottery. All respondents (*N*=400) are expected to answer all the questions.

Measures

Nineteen items measure avoiding strategies based on Cote (2017) and Fox and Tang (2014). Twenty-five items measure participatory strategies based on Cote (2017) and Fox and Tang (2014). A nine-item measure for gamer identification, adopted from Yim et al. (2023). Eight items scale adopted from Chen et al. (2001) measure self-efficacy. Perceived ease of use and effectiveness are measured via twelve-item scale developed by Davis (1989).

Expected Outcomes

This study will broaden knowledge of toxicity and toxicity management in the field of esports communication. Examining the psychological and self-identity factors that influence how female gamers adopt different coping mechanisms will further our understanding of both the challenges that female gamers are facing on their way to competitive gaming as well as their extant strategies for overcoming these. Understanding when participants are adopting avoidance or participatory strategies can in turn help scholars and designers better support women gamers' coping mechanisms to build more inclusive gaming and esports communities. As esports offer increasing economic, cultural, and social benefits, ensuring equitable access to competitive gaming will help diverse populations experience these outcomes.

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