

The Gendered Differences in the Connections between Game Streaming and Gaming Motivations Throughout Adolescence

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Adolescence marks the onset of a gendered shift in patterns of digital game participation. While there is no clear gender-based disparity in children's initial engagement with game culture, as evidenced by the fact that 90% of girls aged 11–12 report playing games at least once a month (Laakso et al., 2023), during adolescence girls start dropping out of gaming. While this applies to gaming in general, this discontinuation of gaming appears to be a gendered pattern specific to a certain age and certain type of gaming, i.e., social gaming.

There is a long history of research into gendered exclusion within game cultures. Both in the contents of games e.g. character representations, hypermasculinity and hypersexualisation (Harkin, 2025; Phillips, 2020) as well as in exclusive communities and practices (Drenten et al., 2023; Shaw, 2014). As girls' gaming has been studied extensively already, we look at more contemporary developments in how communities are created in game cultures and how they support the gameplay of individual players. We focus especially on how *game streaming* has impacted girls' game cultural participation.

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Streaming has become a large phenomenon both in and out of game culture. Streaming can be seen as providing support for gameplay as strategies and recontextualizing the content of games. How game streaming motivates actual gameplay is still a less studied phenomenon. Research on streaming has shown that it has had the power to create communities around games on an unprecedented scale (Taylor 2018; Johnson, 2024). However, the potential for inclusive communities built on third-party platforms is often undermined by the exclusionary and discriminatory communities and norms (Argaman et al., 2026). Indeed, streaming culture(s) has ‘inherited’ many lot of toxic traits identified in game cultures. In streaming communities there is known to be visible harassment and bullying —discrimination against under-represented streamers, especially women (Ruberg et al., 2019; Tomlinson, 2024). On the other hand, there are also efforts to foster more inclusive communities (Uszkoreit, 2018; Argaman et al., 2026). We analyze how this context affects the ways streaming culture is entangled with social gaming and gaming motivations and how this can be seen in a gendered way from childhood to adolescence.

We utilize a longitudinal study design that examines the interaction effects of streaming, gaming motives, and social gaming throughout adolescence. We discuss gaming motives through self-determination theory (Ryan et al., 2006), contributing to the literature on game cultures by the specific emphasis on motivational factors in social gaming. Our data is an exceptionally large quantitative dataset of Helsinki children aged 11–18 gathered during a period of four years (2019–2022) (N=4922). We present a random intercept cross-lagged panel model that shows the relationships of social gaming and watching streaming through the gaming motives of relatedness and competence. One of the motivational factors in self-determination theory ‘autonomy’ did not converge as a variable through confirmatory factor analysis.

Our findings show that the relationship between streaming and social gaming is highly dependent on gender – for girls watching streaming is supported by social gaming while for non-girls the situation is the opposite. Watching streaming is the strongest indicator for future watching for all respondents. Additionally, the relationships between motivational factors, social gaming and streaming in the girls’ model are much sparser, which potentially indicates that girls have much fewer ways of participating in game culture or alternatively that this study did not encompass all

forms of game-cultural participation or forms of communality that would emerge as significant among girls. Finally, the fact that we see a lot less interaction between variables toward the end of the data could indicate that game cultural habits become more established during this period of adolescence, where gender norms also become more enforced (Kågesten et al. 2016). The toxicity found in game cultures has harmed gaming communities (Boudreau, 2022) and provides an important backdrop to the motivational pathways we see in this study. However, as our data and earlier research does not show a similar drop in non-binary respondents (Laakso et al. 2023), we surmise that there are still other factors specific to girlhood that provide additional explanations to our results.

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