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Androcentrism and Violence in Online Video Games: Perpetuation of Gender Inequality

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Abstract

This article aims to offer an analysis of the presence of hate speech, harassment, and cyber-violence towards women in the interaction within massively multiplayer online video games (MMOs), an act of gender-based violence perpetrated through new technologies in an environment generally described as androcentric. Filling a gap in the experience in Spain, a qualitative methodology was applied that allowed us to analyse the forms of harassment towards female video gamers, as well as some of the consequences of experiencing these situations for them. A systematic analysis of the discourses was carried out after five focus groups and 15 in-depth interviews with young people between 18 and 29. Amongst the results, it is worth highlighting that, as occurs in offline reality, in MMOs gender schemas and asymmetric relationships are reproduced that perpetuate gender-based violence. On the one hand, female gamers affirm that they suffer sexist violence in gaming environments through the use of language focused on physical appearance, hypersexualisation, and undervaluation, and are often considered intruders. On the other hand, they also report experiencing overprotective and paternalistic behaviours. Female gamers sometimes decide to leave their games, or avoid certain types of games apriori, because of toxic behaviours perpetrated by male gamers, which generates feelings of discrimination in their experiences as players, perpetuating androcentric patterns in this sort of environment. Applying a gender approach, this article will examine the social implications of these behaviours in order to propose appropriate social and educational responses.

Keywords

1. Introduction

For young people, online environments have become important spaces for interaction and socialisation. As well as providing entertainment, these spaces allow young people to build relationships, develop social skills, and shape their identities (B. Braun et al., 2016; de Hesselle et al., 2021; Romo et al., 2023). Online video games, in particular, have become embedded in contemporary culture, serving as one of the main forms of entertainment, communication, and socialisation for young people. As such, they are not only technological but also sociocultural tools (Martínez-Verdú, 2023; Voorhees, 2018). This is reflected not only in increasing turnover and business growth figures, but also in the number of users (Calderón-Gómez & Gómez-Miguel, 2023). In 2023, the number of Spanish gamers reached 20 million, of which 51% are male and 49% female, with an average weekly playing time of more than seven hours. It is estimated that 86% of young people aged 15–24 play video games (Asociación Española de Videojuegos, 2024). The penetration of video games into society via the younger generations is very much a reality, with around three out of four adolescents and young people in Spain playing video games (Calderón-Gómez & Gómez-Miguel, 2022).

The ability to play online with people from all over the world is increasingly appealing to many young people. Massively multiplayer online video games (MMOs) allow them to play with people from across the globe, creating virtual worlds where they can cooperate, compete, and communicate (Raith et al., 2021). Authors like Kafai et al. (2008) or Taylor (2008) discuss how these virtual worlds and casual games have attracted a wider female audience. These spaces build communities and social networks that influence the development of values and behaviours, but they are also vulnerable to cyberhate (Arroyo-López & Esteban-Ramiro, 2022; Costa et al., 2021). However, they lack adequate safeguards, exposing young people to risks such as privacy violations and direct exposure to online violence and bullying (Aghazadeh et al., 2018; Marín-Díaz & Cabero-Almenara, 2019; Tang et al., 2020).

1.1. Video Games as Androcentric Spaces

Despite almost half of gamers being female, the stereotype that video games are a male pastime persists (McLean & Griffiths, 2019; Mendick et al., 2021; Paaßen et al., 2017). Online video games are seen as a "man's world" where interactions reinforce masculine norms (Blackburn & Scharrer, 2019; Cote, 2020). Within this androcentric gamer culture, masculinity is associated with competitiveness, dedication, and superior skill (Shaw, 2012). As a result, many women do not identify with "the gamer" stereotype and are excluded from this category (Kuss et al., 2022; Vermeulen et al., 2017). Studies like Taylor's (2003) specified how women interact with games that are not explicitly designed for them, broadening the debate on gender and technology.

The increasing presence of women in online video games is perceived as a threat by many male gamers, leading to feelings of discrimination and rejection (Amores, 2023; Bustos-Ortega et al., 2024; Tang et al., 2020). This marginalisation also affects women in fields such as design, programming, and content creation (Aghazadeh et al., 2018; Isaaman & Tolaine-Sage, 2022). Vossen (2018) introduces the concept of "cultural inaccessibility" to describe how women are perceived as outsiders in gaming culture, facing obstacles that make them feel unwelcome. In this way, the gaming industry and its internal culture maintain contradictory narratives about inclusion and the persistence of sexism (Cote, 2020). Video games can be toxic spaces for women, with misogyny and harassment deeply ingrained in the culture (Jenson & de Castell, 2021).

Stereotypes and expectations towards women have a negative impact on their performance. Facing comments such as "You play like a girl" affects their gameplay (Kaye & Pennington, 2016; Vermeulen et al., 2017), influencing their self-identification and participation in video games (Taylor, 2008). Furthermore, a gender hierarchy has been normalised in these environments, presenting women as a threat to the male status quo (Jenson & de Castell, 2021) and relegating them to a subordinate position within the gaming domain (Bustos-Ortega, 2024; Gray et al., 2017).

1.2. Toxicity in Gaming: Online Violence, Hate Speech, and Sexism Towards Women Gamers

In MMOs, players often comment on the varying levels of toxicity between communities. Research has looked at how tension between players and antisocial behaviours manifest through insults and offensive language in online gaming (Kwak & Blackburn, 2015; Tang et al., 2020). They include hate speech motivated by gender, race, or sexual orientation, which further exacerbates the risks of harassment in these environments for people who belong to these groups. Additionally, ethnographic studies like Shaw's (2014) highlight how the social representation of gender—like other characteristics, like being LGBTQ, influences experiences and generates inequality and exclusion among players. According to the Anti-Defamation League (2022), three in five young people aged 13–17 have experienced harassment in online video games, affecting approximately 14 million in the United States. Anonymity and the normalisation of hate speech in these spaces is a growing social and academic concern (Blaya & Audrin, 2019), with studies showing high levels of hate in these environments (Reichelmann et al., 2020; Wachs et al., 2022). It is essential to consider the unique characteristics of the online context—such as anonymity, competition, and social disinhibition—that distinguish it from the offline gaming environment (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018). Feelings of insecurity, particularly among players from vulnerable groups, are heightened by the lack of effective mechanisms to curb such behaviour.

There has been a growing interest in defining the forms of sexism experienced by women gamers, with studies highlighting the various ways in which it manifests (Fox & Tang, 2017; McLean & Griffiths, 2019; Tang et al., 2020). These studies are informed by ambivalent sexism theory (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2011), which describes the coexistence of both hostile and benevolent sexism as forms of female subordination. Numerous cases of harassment and hostility towards women gamers have been reported in the US, accounting for 25% of the worldwide total (Entertainment Software Association, n.d.). This situation is described as "cyber gender violence" or "cyber misogyny," where male chauvinist stereotypes and roles are played out in online spaces through visual representations and power dynamics (Donoso-Vázquez, 2018; Jane, 2018). To analyse this kind of cyber misogyny, Bustos-Ortega et al. (2023) have developed the Sexism Against Women Gamers Scale that takes into account the particular characteristics of an online gaming environment. This includes underestimating aggression towards women gamers, considering them too sensitive, and belittling their interest and ability.

The rise of online video games has raised concerns about discrimination against women gamers, manifested in forms such as sexual harassment and sexist comments (Amores, 2023). The repercussions of these incidents go beyond simply abandoning a game; women gamers experience anxiety, depressive symptoms, stress, and negative effects on their identity as gamers (Fox et al., 2018; McLean & Griffiths, 2019). This creates a sense of helplessness that leads women to conceal their gender, avoid communication, or even drop out of gaming altogether (Cote, 2020; Fox & Tang, 2017). This hostility has become normalised as part of the gaming experience, downplaying the impact it has on women gamers (Vergel et al., 2024).

Most of these studies have been conducted from a quantitative perspective, focusing on the percentage of women who have experienced such situations or on the relationship of these experiences with various study variables (Fox & Tang, 2017; McLean & Griffiths, 2019). The most relevant findings have generally been developed in English-speaking contexts, leaving gaps in research for Spanish-speaking cultural contexts. Regarding young people in Spain, there is limited literature on the subject, with some notable publications exploring hostile behaviours and sexism against women in online video games (Bustos-Ortega, 2024; Calderón-Gómez & Gómez-Miguel, 2023; Santana-Rodríguez, 2020). These studies conclude that experiencing violence and hate in these spaces often has a strong gender component, pointing to the sexism inherent in these contexts.

Moreover, a significant corpus of research in English-speaking countries has used qualitative methodologies, such as content analysis, ethnography, and interviews, to delve into women's meanings and interactions in online video games and MMOs. These studies explore how gender stereotypes and misogyny affect women's participation and enjoyment of gaming, as well as power dynamics within the industry (Cote, 2020; Gray & Leonard, 2018). They also address key events such as the 2014 Gamergate movement, which intensified harassment against women journalists, developers, and academics speaking out against sexism in gaming culture (Vossen, 2018). Furthermore, these studies examine how underrepresentation of identities based on gender, race, and sexuality creates exclusion and cultural inaccessibility for certain groups (Gray & Leonard, 2018; Shaw, 2014; Taylor, 2008). They adopt a critical and comprehensive approach, interpreting reality through the meanings attributed by individuals and analysing how gender influences the creation, consumption, and perception of video games, as well as how feminism can drive a more inclusive and equitable industry (Jenkins & Cassell, 2008).

In Spain, there is little research that captures women's direct experiences of harassment and sexism in video games using qualitative methodologies. Some studies have examined gaming culture broadly in terms of gamer identity, but these do not specifically focus on understanding women's experiences (Muriel, 2018). Moldes (2019) analysed the working conditions of female esports players, while Afonso Noda and Aguilera Ávila (2021) explored feelings, experiences of inequality, and opinions about exclusive spaces for women in gaming, using only six semi-structured interviews. More recently, Mihura-López et al. (2023) investigated the experiences of female gamers, showing how violence and toxicity affect their participation, often leading to self-exclusion or rejection of the gamer label due to its toxic connotations. However, their findings rely on a single focus group.

The limited transferability of findings from previous research underscores the need for further exploration, as proposed in this study. Calderón-Gómez and Gómez-Miguel (2023, p. 11) emphasise the importance of studying the experiences of women gamers in Spain, focusing on violence and sexual harassment in online multiplayer games through quantitative methodologies.

The absence of qualitative research in Spanish limits a deeper understanding of how gender dynamics in gaming affect Spanish-speaking women. Qualitative studies are essential to gather direct testimonies and explore personal narratives, offering a more comprehensive perspective on the impact of sexism and gender representation in this community.

In order to explore interactions in online games in greater depth, we propose a feminist approach that examines gender bias. This article has two aims: (a) to analyse the presence, typology, and manifestations of

hate speech, online violence, and sexism against women in multiplayer video games; and (b) to determine personal and social effects of these behaviours on women through their own experiences as gamers.

2. Methodology

2.1. Design

The study used a qualitative methodological design to explore phenomena such as violence, hate, and sexism in video games through the experiences of women gamers. The aim is to ask questions that help to reconstruct reality as observed by subjects within a defined social system (Sampieri, 2018) and to know how this reality acts specifically in the Spanish context since there is no previous solid evidence. Semi-structured interview ($n = 15$) and focus group ($n = 5$) techniques were used. This study is part of a larger research project approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Castilla-La Mancha in 2023. Ethical principles, confidentiality, and protection of personal data were guaranteed throughout the process.

This type of methodology captures the complexity of the problem and attempts to understand the coping strategies, impact, and social and cultural implications of sexism in online gaming spaces. It also addresses the power structures and gender norms at play in these environments.

2.2. Participants and Sample

A total of 49 participants were involved, 38 of whom were women. Fifteen of the women participated in semi-structured interviews, while the others took part in focus groups, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants and techniques.

Technique	Total no. of participants	No. of women	No. of men
Focus groups	34	23	11
Semi-structured interviews	15	15	0
Total	49	38	11

The participants, aged 18–29 years (M = 25.2), were mostly students (87.7%, $n = 43$), while 12.3% ($n = 6$) were employed. Ninety-four percent were Spanish nationals and six percent ($n = 3$) had dual nationality (Spanish and Romanian or Chilean). All participants lived or studied in Castilla-La Mancha, the geographical area covered by the project.

Recruitment was voluntary and targeted at "young gamers," with a particular focus on attracting *women* gamers. Three of the five focus groups were mixed in order to analyse whether men recognised the same misogynistic situations during gameplay or if—on the contrary—they had other experiences different from the girls. A non-probabilistic snowball sampling method was therefore used, with different sample selection strategies:

1. Using an earlier study with surveys in educational centres, where interested participants left their data;
2. Online dissemination via Instagram profiles: one from a collaborating organisation (@INEEYS) and another from an influential gamer (@feminismoen8bits), which encouraged women who were initially interested in participating to recommend other women.

The focus groups were made up entirely of people who had heard about the study at their educational establishments, while the interviews were proportionally split between the two recruitment methods.

2.3. Procedure

Fifteen in-depth interviews and five focus groups were conducted between May and September 2024. Participants who provided their contact details were invited to the interviews after giving informed consent and agreeing on their preferred method (in-person or Microsoft Teams). All interviews were conducted in private, with informed consent to record the session and assurances of confidentiality of participants' personal data. The interviews and focus groups were conducted by three members of the research team.

The interviews were structured into eight thematic blocks with 23 open-ended questions aligned with the objectives of the study. At the end of each interview, participants were invited to share any additional thoughts on the situation of women gamers.

The focus groups, consisting of six or seven participants and a researcher, were designed to verify and supplement the narratives from the interviews. For this reason, the groups were mixed to capture the perceptions of some men about behaviours towards women in gaming as a contrast method, since it was not one of the central objectives of the study. A series of categories were established to guide the group discussion of the issues (identification of video games; identity; online violence, harassment, and sexism; personal and social impacts; measures and codes of conduct; and proposals for effective and awareness-raising initiatives). Members of the research team were also provided with a list of possible questions to help generate topics of interest.

2.4. Analysis

On completion of the interviews and focus groups, the data were anonymised and fully transcribed by two researchers, who then familiarised themselves thoroughly with the information collected. Initial coding was then carried out to ensure that data saturation had been achieved (Guest et al., 2020).

Different semantic codes were used to generate independent themes, which were then compared. This process identified recurring patterns that were grouped into thematic lines and sub-themes. This process followed the guidelines of V. Braun and Clarke (2006). As a quantitative study had been carried out beforehand, it was found that most of the categories corresponded to the original proposals. However, additional sub-themes were included to allow for a more detailed and in-depth analysis of the situations under investigation.

A structural discourse analysis was carried out, following the approach proposed by Conde (2009). The focus is on the interest in discourse for the knowledge of social reality. Considering the context in which they are produced, it is about knowing how the group constructs social reality—how social discourses shape and give identity to these subjects. On the basis of this analysis, a classification was established that identified discursive patterns, analysed semantic spaces, and determined discursive positions. This enabled the identification of narrative configurations that show how experiences affect the identities of women gamers and their participation in the community, as detailed in the results section.

To ensure internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity, a committee of research team members reviewed, grouped, and reorganised the themes. This process ensured internal consistency and the inclusion of all issues raised by respondents. The codes used for the narratives were ME (*mujer entrevista*) followed by a number for the women interviewed (e.g., ME 7). For the narratives of women and men in groups we use M or HG (*mujeres/hombres en grupos*) followed by a letter (identifying the group) and a number (identifying the individual). It should be noted that the interviews were conducted and transcribed in Spanish, an English translation of this text has been made.

It is important to note certain limitations of the study. It applies a qualitative methodology, which limits its generalisability, although it provides important knowledge for understanding the phenomenon. The research is limited to the geographical area of Castilla-La Mancha in Spain and involves a sample of young people, collecting the direct experiences of female players only up to the age of 29. To avoid response bias, participants were informed that the aim was to explore their experiences as video gamers. However, beforehand they signed informed consent documentation with all the information about the study. Despite this, all participants were free to express their opinions.

3. Results and Discussion

Five main themes emerged from the initial analysis. Following the coding and categorisation exercise, sub-themes were added to these main themes (which aligned with the overarching categories of the wider research) to provide greater insight into the narratives, as shown in Table 2.

The findings are thus presented bearing in mind how gender mandates cut across these new relational spaces in the context of online video games. The following sections outline each of the main themes and their development within the structural analysis of the narratives concerned. Finally, we will map the narrative configurations by identifying the discursive positions that emerged from the initial discourse analysis.

Table 2. Identified themes and sub-themes.

Gaming habits and experiences	Manifestations of violence: hatred and sexism towards women gamers	Contributing factors	Consequences of and responses to violence	Countermeasures and actions
Video games as spaces for socialisation	Insults, harassment, and humiliation; sexual objectification, belittling, intrusion	Regarding women as outsiders and threats	Personal and social impacts (psycho-social impacts)	Ineffectiveness and inadequacy of measures
Identity concealment	Overprotective behaviour, paternalism, and possessiveness.	Anonymity	Downplayed/minimisation and failure to call out subjugation	Lack of adaptation to real-life gaming contexts
Gender roles and stereotypes in characters and avatars		Impunity	Building support networks: community	Identification of mediators

3.1. Gaming Habits and Experiences

The most widely played video games include League of Legends (LOL), World of Warcraft (WOW), Host, Valorant, and Fortnite. Most participants have many years of experience playing video games, making them a fundamental space for entertainment and social interaction.

3.1.1. Video Games as Spaces for Socialisation

Some participants started gaming in childhood (at the of 6, 8, or 10), but most report having begun as teenagers. The Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown are mentioned as pivotal moments that increased the amount of time spent playing video games. For them, gaming has become one of their main leisure activities, where they can unwind and meet up with friends:

> To be honest, when I started, you end up joining a gaming community and you don't know anyone there, but over time, you meet people and that's cool. For example, I'm still in touch with the people I first started talking to back in 2020 and we do organise meet-ups, I see them every month or every other month and in the end they've become very close friends. (MGb-3)

Some of the participants reported having entered into romantic relationships:

> I began a romantic relationship and everything, believe it or not! We just started chatting, exchanged Instas [referring to the social network Instagram] and after a while we met up and all that and it took off. (ME 7)

The importance of this online space as a vehicle for social interaction is noted, and it is seen as a sociocultural as well as a technological environment (Martínez-Verdú, 2023), where young people use that to build communities, relationships, and identities (Tang et al., 2020) which positions them not only as recreational spaces but as significant cultural forms, what Voorhees (2018) calls the "ludic Renaissance."

3.1.2. Identity Concealment

Participants reported direct risks and experiences of privacy violations, where other players exposed their identities or social media profiles by discovering names or initials, especially in MMOs. Gender bias emerges as many women hide their gender or know others who do, using neutral nicknames, avoiding specifying their gender, or using voice chat. The women see these as preventive measures, as they often face harassment and bullying when they are identified as women in the game. Most take such measures to avoid what they consider to be toxic situations. There are many examples of this phenomenon:

> They're always trying to hit on you, or give you gifts, or just say inappropriate things to you. So, based on the advice of people who were already playing, I decided to go down that route, I don't identify myself as a girl, and because of that, I can play without any hassles. (ME 4)

> In games where you can hide your username, I keep it hidden, and if there's an option not to use voice chat, I do that so I don't have to deal with insults and hate….I pass on that. (ME 12)

3.1.3. Gender Roles and Stereotypes in Characters and Avatars

Stereotyping and sexual segregation have been studied extensively, with particular interest in game content (Gestos et al., 2018; Mccullough et al., 2020; Robinson, 2023). Recent studies have analysed the importance of the link between stereotypes in characters and games and their impact on gaming skills (Lynch et al., 2024). Thus, qualitative research such as Shaw's (2014) applies an intersectional approach, highlighting how gender, race, class, and sexual orientation do not operate in isolation as they generate inequalities and exclusions across the video game ecosystem. It is important to draw attention to this, as some research shows a link between the sexualisation of video games and online sexual harassment of women (Burnay et al., 2019).

Interviewees highlight the hypersexualization of female characters in video games, promoting unrealistic images that influence behavior. Male avatars are linked to power and combat, while female avatars reinforce sexualized archetypes like the femme fatale, Lolita, or powerful fighter.

They suggest that the characterisation of the character and/or avatar ultimately influences in-game roles, in line with recent research showing how these roles influence behaviour towards women gamers (Chappetta & Barth, 2020).

3.2. Manifestations of Violence: Hatred and Sexism Towards Women Gamers

Gender, race, and sexual orientation are direct triggers for hate speech during gameplay, with gender being the main reason for insults against women gamers. All interviewees acknowledged the presence of violence, albeit to varying degrees. There is a consistent pattern of violence towards women gamers simply because they are women, particularly in MMOs, where insults and harassment are clearly gender-based. Such attacks conflate their female identity with their role as gamers, with sexist behaviour manifesting itself in two main ways:

1. Hostility, aggression, and sexual harassment (hostile sexism);
2. Overprotectiveness and possessiveness (benevolent sexism).

This is reflected in the extract from this mixed focus group:

> They can go one of two ways, they're either more into insulting and putting women down or they try to hit on them [everyone laughs in unison and say "yeah, yeah, exactly," nodding in agreement]. (HGe-1)

> [Finishing off what a man has just said] It's either I'll help you and you make it up to me...or you're just a piece of shit. (MGe-5)

The presence of ambivalent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996) in relationships between boys and girls in online video games is therefore clearly evident, as demonstrated by the interviewees. This is consistent with the findings of Fox and Tang (2017).

3.2.1. Insults, Harassment, and Hatred: Hostile Sexism

Hostile attitudes, aggression, and sexual harassment towards women are clearly evident during video game interactions. It is noticeable that the insulting behaviour directed at women gamers during gameplay is usually

linked to gender biases resulting from the androcentric power structures of the space. Many women gamers accept open expressions of hatred and hostility as being part of the gaming experience. In most cases, this is expressed in the following ways:

1. By belittling their attributes and playing ability (simply because they are women);
2. By unreasonable demands and accusations of being intruders in the game, often accompanied by insults or taunts rooted in traditional male chauvinism, suggesting that they should stick to domestic tasks. This is reflected in the following examples:

> You hear all sorts of things, like, "go back to the kitchen," "you're of no use here." (ME 6)

> "Go and do the dishes," "make me a sandwich; that'll do you good." (MGc-7)

> There's always that one guy who starts it off first….I mean, they don't all jump in at the same time, there's always one guy who goes: "Look, we've got a bitch here, what the hell!…" or suddenly one guy comes right out and says: "Woman, go do the dishes!" and then everyone else joins in and plays along. (ME 11)

The boys participating in the groups pointed out the same devaluations and insults towards the girls:

> The usual, they tell them to go back to the kitchen or call them a whore, which always comes up, and of course, they throw sexual insults at them. (HGc-2)

One of the interviewees, who played competitively at a semi-professional level, had her account hacked immediately after winning a tournament when it was discovered that she was a woman:

> I've played competitively before, and when you get into a professional-level tournament, that's when they really come after you. That's where you feel the difference, they even went as far as deleting my account when we won, they found out from the other team that I was a woman so they hacked me, and I can't access that account anymore. (MGb-2)

Finally, there is a range of sexual harassment and abuse that reduces these players to mere sexual objects:

> In everyday terms, when I know, for example, in games like LOL or Overwatch…the second you hear over the chat, because you can hear the voices over the equipment, the second a girl's voice comes on, all hell breaks loose…either they're all blaming you or they're asking for your number to send a photo, or whatever. (ME 8)

> It happens all the time that as soon as they hear that there is a woman there, they start asking for a pic or your Insta, they hit on you….It's gross, they go all out. (MGb-2)

> Even harassment…suddenly they find out that you are a woman and they start talking to you every day, asking you for your phone number and chatting to you….It's like they start to assume that you're up for a date, that you want something more….It's like you go from being just…like….I don't know how to put it…like because you play video games and he's in that game you must be into him. (ME 1)

Sexual comments and attempts to initiate private relationships with women players are common, making them vulnerable to harassment or abuse. Studies like McLean and Griffiths (2019) report that 54% of women gamers receive requests for sexual favors. Research by Fox and Tang (2017), Fox et al. (2018), and Bustos et al. (2023) indicate that aggression towards women in gaming follows patriarchal patterns: Male gamers treat them as outsiders, belittling their skills and sexualizing them.

3.2.2. Protective Paternalism: Overprotection

In addition to explicit expressions of hatred and violence towards women, there is another set of more subtle sexist attitudes that manifest themselves in overprotective behaviours during gameplay. In such cases, some boys take on the stereotypical role of protector, in the belief that women need to be saved or protected. These players, coming from a position of power and skill, engage with women gamers in a possessive manner:

> And what I've experienced the most is like an attempt at positive discrimination—"don't shoot her, poor thing, she's a girl," "oh, no, sorry, this girl just took you out!" (ME 13)

> They say silly things…or give [girls] gifts that make no sense. I mean…you always see paternalistic attitudes or rude comments or things that would never be said if it was a boy [involved]. (ME 4)

Male participants also acknowledge these overprotective attitudes towards women. They mention that many guys act like "heroes" and see themselves as "saviours" when playing with them.

We can therefore conclude that sexism in its various forms is deeply rooted in the online gaming environment and can be seen in men's interactions with women gamers, following the existing literature (Tang et al., 2020; Vergel et al., 2024). The growth of video games to wider, more diverse audiences has not removed sexism in gaming. Women still face gender stereotypes and misogyny, affecting their participation and enjoyment (Cote, 2020).

3.3. Contributing Factors

Among the factors that many of the women highlight as contributing to misogyny and sexist behaviour during gameplay, there are certain recurring narratives, like the way that women are regarded as intruders (they are "in a man's world"), or the anonymity afforded by gaming and a sense of impunity in the face of their actions. In many cases, a distinction is made between communities that are labelled as either more toxic or safer. It seems, therefore, that MMOs (where you can play with people from all over the world), are more prone to these kinds of situations. Participants also point out that this tends to be linked to games where there is more competition and stress. In these cases, more violent behaviour is observed, both in general and specifically against women. Examples include games such as LOL, WOW, or Fortnite:

> It really depends on the games because some communities are super toxic and others are much friendlier….In their own team, maybe someone messes up and is very nervous and they start badmouthing you. They'll start taking it out on you for whatever reason and instead of playing to win, they play to lose and screw you over. (MGc-1)

> It's mainly because of the competitive aspect. The more competitive the game, the more stressful it's going to be. I see it in terms of sport, like in physical sports, for example, you're physically relieving yourself of the stress of wanting to win. But of course, in gaming, people's way of relieving themselves of everything from that desire to win is to insult one other. (HGc-2)

The women gamers themselves argue that they feel like a minority and that men who act violently typically do so in the belief that the women players are intruding into a space that does not belong to them. This reinforces their male dominance and leads to harassment and hostility towards those women who are present, as they are perceived as a threat.

> I don't want to interact with…because you feel a little bit…in online games, as most of them are guys, it's like you're alone in a nightclub. (ME 9)

> So at the slightest glimpse of a girl they already assume that you're no good, that you're not up to it, it's internalised that this is a man's world. (MGb-4)

A common and widely recognised issue is the role that anonymity plays in these expressions of violence. All participants agree that this is a fundamental aspect and condition that reinforces such behaviour, as is the case in other online environments. In addition, a sense of impunity in relation to the consequences of insulting or harassing others in these environments is identified as the second main factor behind these situations:

> The screen makes them think they are protected from everything and that there are no consequences for anything. (ME 4)

> In the end, social networks or games are supposed to bring us closer to people, but there's a barrier of anonymity that makes it seem as though there are no consequences for whatever you're doing at any given time. (ME 5)

Furthermore, much of the narrative shows that this problem is linked to a wider system of values. We live in a sexist society and this is reflected in gaming as well as in other areas of life. Not everyone explicitly articulates this discursive line of thought, which clearly underlies the analysis of narrative configurations.

These findings should be interpreted bearing in mind that hostility has been normalised as part of the gaming experience, downplaying the potential consequences for women gamers (Vergel et al., 2024). These factors play an important role in fostering hostile attitudes, consistent with studies suggesting that the intrinsic features of online video games, such as competitiveness and anonymity, encourage negative reactions towards women (Breuer et al., 2015; Ruvalcaba et al., 2018). The online disinhibition effect, so-called toxic disinhibition, facilitates sexism in online interactions (Wachs & Wright, 2018).

3.4. Responses to and Consequences of Violence

Women gamers respond to virtual violence by blocking, muting, reporting, or ignoring aggressors, and often by leaving the game to avoid harassment. The normalization and downplaying of such behaviors are common

coping mechanisms. Online communities play a key role as protectors and buffers, with women emphasizing the need to build their own community' for support and protection against violence:

> I usually just stop talking and I've even dropped out of a game, to be honest. But normally I try not to take it so personally, for example, and I don't talk and I just keep quiet and that's that, and you avoid talking or you stay silent. (ME 7)

> What I did was ignore them, not give them any attention at all….I act like they're not there…but yeah, at times I've ended up leaving the game because they get really pushy. (ME 1)

Such situations have a number of direct consequences for women gamers, which are sometimes explicitly recognised as psychological and social effects, while at other times downplayed as being "part of the game."

In terms of personal and social effects, women gamers experience increased pressure, as well as feelings of anger, rage, or fear during gameplay. In some cases, they choose to quit the game to avoid further repercussions. However, they do not always recognise this as a negative outcome, even though it directly affects their ability to play on an equal footing and limits their personal freedom. In many cases, there is a tendency to downplay these consequences:

> I didn't really care because I'm very laid back….I mean, I used to get so mad before, I even got sad because they ruined the game for me. Look, now, I prefer to leave the game, I'll start doing other stuff and then maybe I'll be back in an hour, but honestly, in my case, it doesn't bother me because I know my worth. These days it doesn't matter what you say to me. (ME 13)

> To me it's obviously a negative vibe. I know of women who have tried to get into LOL, for example, and…they've given up gaming and don't want to play online games anymore because they don't want to be judged or insulted or treated badly, people aren't made of stone even if they are in a video game. (ME 3)

> I've often stayed out of games because I don't want to have people insulting me. I've got my life, I've got my own shit to deal with without putting up with insults from strangers, it really pisses me off. (ME 9)

Their preferred response, however, is to play and build communities of fellow gamers to avoid such situations and, above all, to confront and address them:

> In World of Warcraft…your group is usually your guild. Once you find a guild that you feel comfortable in, then the guild itself ends up protecting you, so to speak. And before then you do the vast majority of things in the game with them. (ME 3)

> Of course, I'm telling you that I play with my community, we're all in the WhatsApp group, [and] there, the first guy that goes too far, people go after him and we don't let it go…of course. (ME 13)

> I'm lucky, I play with my community, so to say. With friends, they have my back, or I don't need to use voice chat outside my group…and in the end, that's a safe environment for me. (ME 1)

Seeking community alternatives and choosing to stop playing are the most effective responses for women gamers. However, both options limit their ability to explore the games and improve their skills, and affect their self-esteem as gamers.

Research shows that women gamers often face anxiety, stress, loneliness, and negative impacts on their gamer identity (Fox et al., 2018; McLean & Griffiths, 2019). Victims are left to find solutions, limiting their freedom of choice, while support networks in gaming are crucial. Studies like Vergel et al. (2024) confirm that cybersexism causes women to play less or leave gaming, perpetuating inequality, reducing digital participation, and widening the gender digital divide. Persistent gender bias in gaming culture leads to segregated safe spaces that offer social support for women gamers (Zhang et al., 2023). These findings align with the proposals of Cote (2020) and Vossen (2018), documenting how women and other marginalised groups are creating alternative communities and projects that challenge the dominant norms of gaming culture.

3.5. Measures Taken by the Platforms and Actions to Combat the Problem

Women gamers criticize the ineffectiveness of platform measures, which fail to align with current game dynamics. While initiatives like banning certain words in chats and adding mediators in smaller games exist, they are insufficient. Reporting is the primary tool but is seen as ineffective due to delays and strict conditions for action. Bans for sexist behavior are rare, with harsher penalties typically targeting griefing. Additionally, the lack of an instant reporting option for voice chat further limits responses to inappropriate behavior:

> It's that they know that nothing happens, at most that they leave you without playing for a few minutes, an hour or so, which doesn't usually happen. If there were other legal consequences, of knowing who you are and so on...but they don't care. If they ban you or take away your game account, well, let's see! In a minute they make another one for free. (ME 8)

3.6. Analysis of the Narrative Configurations

The significance of the results lies in their ability to establish connections through the narratives and experiences shared by players themselves. By constructing a narrative framework, the structural analysis of discourse structural discourse analysis reveals that online video games, particularly MMOs, function as androcentric power spaces, which is evident in their design, gameplay dynamics, and asymmetrical relationships. Women are perceived as intruders in a masculinised environment that becomes toxic and competitive within certain games and communities (competitive, stressful, high-tension multiplayer games).

Female players specifically describe experiences of hatred and derogatory comments rooted in sexism, highlighting the use of crude and often simplistic language when referencing "feminised roles." Figure 1 illustrates an analytical framework comprising two closely interrelated axes: the axis of violence and the axis of manifestations of effects. This framework seeks to connect women's narratives, offering more than a descriptive approach by exploring how women interrelate the primary scenarios they encounter in the context of online gaming.

On the one hand, there is a clear relationship between violence and its effects: Hostile and overprotective attitudes directly impact female players, restricting their ability to participate freely and affecting their
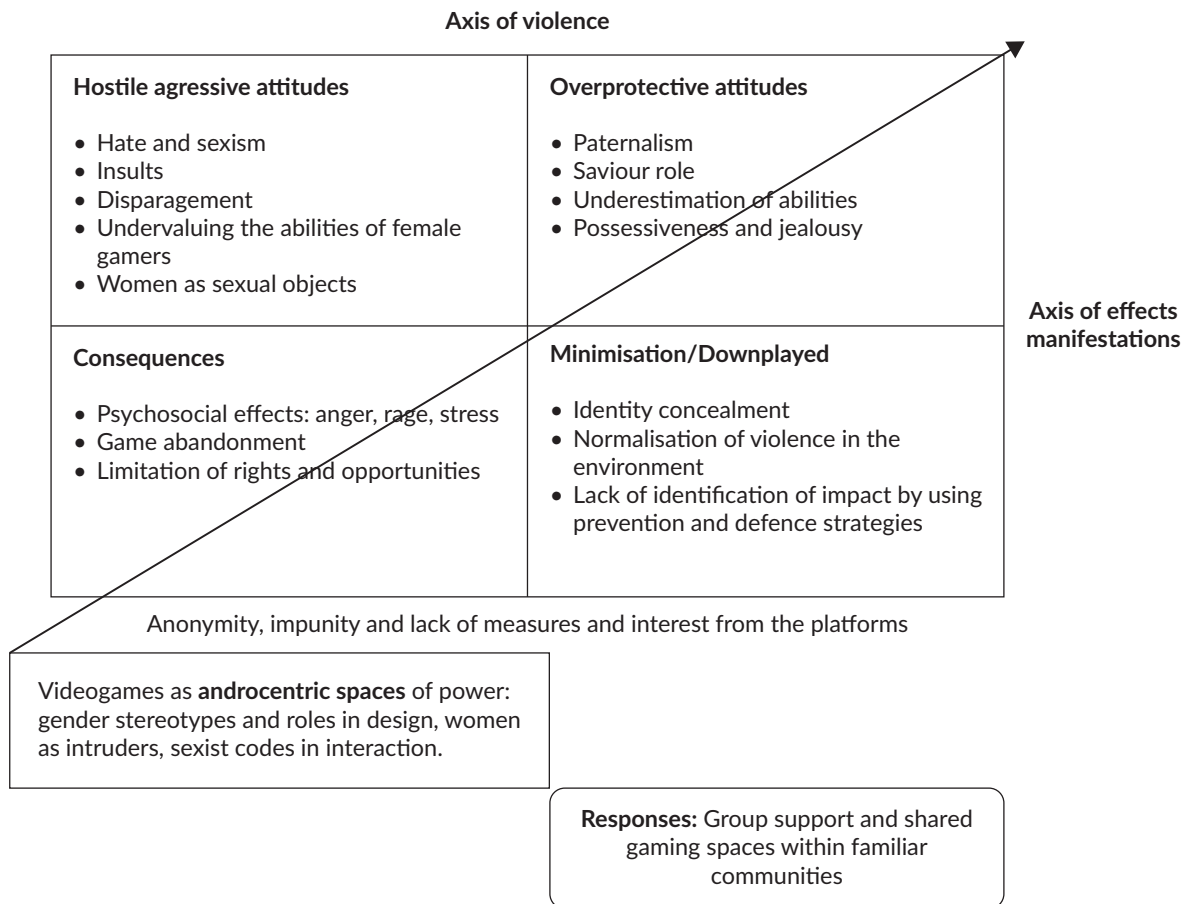
Figure 1. Narrative configurations.

personal well-being. For example, insults and the devaluation of their abilities frequently lead to concealment strategies or even withdrawal from gaming.

On the other hand, there is a feedback loop in which the effects reinforce the perpetuation of violence: individual responses, such as the normalisation and minimisation of these behaviours, bolster existing power dynamics by failing to challenge the androcentric system that dominates video games. Furthermore, the failure of gaming platforms to recognise or address these impacts further perpetuates this reality. Group support and safe communities act as mediators, showing that this violence is not only reflected in specific acts but has a cumulative impact on female players' freedom and participation of the players. This is illustrated in Figure 1.

4. Conclusion

Interviews and focus groups with women gamers reveal key insights into their experiences, shedding light on the manifestations of hate speech and sexism, the dynamics of social interaction, and the consequences they endure. This study highlights the persistence of unequal gender structures in online video games, where female players face dynamics of violence, exclusion, and sexism. These findings underscore how video games, far from being mere spaces of leisure, also function as environments that reflect and reinforce existing social inequalities, as noted by Gray and Leonard (2018) and Jenson and de Castell (2021).

Although the qualitative nature of this study necessitates cautious interpretation, it provides valuable contributions by reconstructing social realities through the subjective experiences of Spanish-speaking gamers, shaped by the role of language in constructing social reality (Van Dijck, 2019). The complexity of sexist interactions in video games is effectively captured through the methodological approach, enabling the identification of relationships between manifestations of violence, their consequences, and women's reactions, all of which are related to gender conditioning factors, as shown in the mapping in narrative configurations. Despite players' attempts to avoid violence through various strategies, such as selectively choosing games, toxicity remains a significant issue, adversely affecting their participation and well-being. Notably, these avoidance strategies, while protective, also limit players' empowerment and freedom within gaming spaces, a critical issue warranting further exploration, a central issue that must continue to be explored in greater depth.

Through narrated experiences, this research confirms that individual responses, such as normalising or downplaying harmful behaviours, contribute to reinforcing the androcentric systems that dominate video games. These behaviours, combined with structural conditions—such as stereotypical game design and inadequate platform responses—perpetuate gender inequality in gaming environments. Additionally, the heightened violence observed specifically in MMO-type games, often normalised by the stressful nature of these games, aligns with studies indicating a higher incidence of violence against intensive female gamers (Calderón-Gómez & Gómez-Miguel, 2023). This hostility, compounded by other cultural factors, influences women's preference for single-player games and their tendency to conceal their identity in online settings (Kuss et al., 2022; Paaßen et al., 2017; Vermeulen et al., 2017).

The women interviewed avoid denigrating situations by carefully selecting the games they play, aligning with research on the exclusion faced by women and marginalised groups, particularly experienced in genres such as shooters and massive multiplayer online role-playing games (MMMORG; see Cote, 2020). An intersectional approach is essential to address the interplay between social structures underpinning video game design and the lived experiences of female players, considering axes of oppression such as race, gender, sexuality, and class (Shaw, 2014). Our findings underscore the responsibility of gaming platforms and developers to implement technological measures and foster cultural shifts to discourage hate speech and promote equality.

Our research indicates that violence against women in video games manifests both as hostile behaviours, such as insults and sexual harassment, and as overprotective actions that reinforce stereotypes of men as "saviours." Both contribute to gender-based exclusion by portraying women as either intruders or dependents, as demonstrated by Amores (2023), Bustos-Ortega (2024), and Fox and Tang (2017). Furthermore, anonymity and impunity normalise this violence, enabling hate speech to flourish (Fox & Tang, 2017; Vermeulen et al., 2017; Wachs et al., 2022). These harmful dynamics result in significant consequences for women, including negative emotions, restricted participation, and, in some cases, withdrawal from gaming spaces.

Women expressed dissatisfaction with gaming platforms' inadequate measures against hate speech and sexism, criticising companies for prioritising sales over player protection. They called for stronger actions and greater awareness to create safer and more equitable gaming environments. Supportive communities, however, can mitigate the impact of sexism, as observed by Zhang et al. (2023).

The main value of this research lies in amplifying the voices of female gamers within the cultural context of Spain, providing a solid foundation for future educational, political, and social interventions aimed at addressing inequality in video games. By examining the sociocultural framework shaping women's experiences, this study offers critical insights for designing preventive and socio-educational actions targeting young people. As cultural products, video games hold transformative potential; however, this potential can only be realised if their underlying structures are critically examined. In line with studies by Fox and Tang (2017), Gray et al. (2018), and Shaw (2020), this work argues that video games must be reimagined as inclusive spaces that celebrate diversity rather than perpetuate exclusion.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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