

**Male gaze, empowerment and the female gamers: The case of “Bayonetta”.**

A qualitative study on the experiences of female gamers playing the “Bayonetta” game series.

Student Name: Leyla Ahmadzada

Student Number: 614151

Supervisor: Dr. Anne-Mette Hermans

Master Media Studies – Media and Business

Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication

Erasmus University Rotterdam

Master's Thesis

*November 2022*

## ABSTRACT

For a considerable amount of time, the issue of female sexualisation in media has been a topic of debate within the academia. To this day, researchers are unable to find a common ground on the conceptualisation of sexualisation. Moreover, the representation of women characters in media, for decades, was seductive and sexualised. Especially, across various video games, the representation of gender was highly stereotypical, as women were portrayed as “sex objects” in exposing attire, while men were depicted as athletic and strong. Such representation, inevitably, leads to sexual objectification, especially of female characters. Nowadays, the stereotypical portrayal of women in games is gradually, as more game companies strive to include female characters that are leading, powerful and independent. Nevertheless, the issue of sexualisation, and the subsequent sexual objectification, of female leads still exist. However, with the rise of female action heroines, such as Bayonetta is evidence of a positive change that is happening in the video game industry in regard to stereotypical representation of women in games. Even though Bayonetta is often critiqued as being the epitome of female sexualisation in games, the fan-base of the game has a huge female audience. Thus, if a character is sexualised for the purpose of the male gaze, then why are so many women appealed to this game? This study uncovers the experiences of female gamers playing the “Bayonetta” game series. This research is of qualitative type, and in-depth interviews were conducted on ten women that played at least one of the games in the “Bayonetta” series. Furthermore, thematic analysis is used as the method of data analysis. As a result of this study, it was concluded that female gamers do not categorize Bayonetta as sexualised, since they perceive sexualisation as a form of exaggerated body features. Moreover, the results suggest that the previous studies on Bayonetta did not consider the context of the game, which is pivotal in its analysis. In addition, female gamers regarded Bayonetta as a feminist character, because of the certain traits that she poses. Finally, female gamers claimed that Bayonetta is an empowering character.

KEYWORDS: *sexualisation, male gaze, feminism, video games, female gamers*

## Table of Contents

<i>ABSTRACT</i> .....	2
<i>1. Introduction</i> .....	4
<i>2. Theoretical Framework</i> .....	8
2.1. Discourse on sexualisation in media .....	8
2.2. Male gaze and empowerment.....	13
2.3. Experiences of female gamers.....	19
<i>3. Methodology</i> .....	24
3.2. Sampling.....	27
3.2.1. Units of analysis .....	27
3.2.2. Sampling strategy .....	28
3.2.3. Data collection.....	29
3.3. Operationalisation .....	30
3.4. Data Analysis .....	31
<i>4. Results</i> .....	33
4.1. Beyond the male gaze .....	33
4.2. Feminist Character .....	38
4.3. Empowerment .....	41
<i>5. Conclusion</i> .....	43
5.1. Theoretical Implications.....	44
5.2. Social Implications .....	46
5.3. Limitations and Future research .....	47
<i>References:</i> .....	48
<i>Appendix A</i> .....	53
<i>Appendix B</i> .....	55
<i>Appendix C</i> .....	58

## 1. Introduction

The idea of “Bayonetta” game series was initially created by Hideki Kamiya, a video game designer previously recognized for his wondrous works; “The Devil May Cry” and “The Resident Evil” game series (Davies, 2016). Its creation began with Kamiya's request for a character scheme to include three traits: a feminine protagonist, four guns, and a modern witch. The game is fast, with excellent combat response and perfect graphics (Lynch et al., 2016). The game's protagonist is Bayonetta, a witch summoning demons using her hair, doubling up as her clothing. She fights with angels using a pistol and her feet, making the game feel weird yet bombastic and sexy. According to Lynch, despite the video game's tremendous fascination Bayonetta, the female protagonist, is sexualized through the use of her body as an object of attraction in the traditionally male-oriented genre [fighting]. Female protagonists in video games are rare; whenever a female character is represented, they are sexualized, increasing self-objectification and decreasing body satisfaction among female users (Lynch et al., 2016). Lynch furtherly notes that there is a rise in video games containing playable feminine characters; however, they are more often portrayed in ancillary roles and are sexualized further than the primary characters.

According to Ward, the media has forced specific body standards on their female figures, swarming the gaming and film world. Sexually objectifying portrayals of female characters often occur in the media questioning the effect of the frequent exposure of the content of other's [male] impressions of females (Ward, 2016). The world's perception of agents has greatly enhanced the male gaze and identity as male, while females are objects to be desired (Oliver, 2017). The negative representation justifies the gaze of the male gender since the industry is a male-dominated fanbase (Smith & Decker, 2016). According to Smith & Decker (2016), the gaze at first was seen as a positive change from mentalities towards depicting women in games; however, it turned out to be sexualized. They further state that the depiction of strong and independent women in media gets overshadowed by their shapely features leading to the gaze and sexualization. Movement of the body can be as powerful since they arouse different perceptions from people; in the case of Bayonetta, the protagonist of the video game, her body movements immensely attract the male gaze. In video games, the way women move suggests their confidence, skills, and personalities; however, the males see body movements as a factor to be desired (Smith & Decker, 2016). In conjunction with the female protagonist's body movement, their clothing design often exudes sexuality to entertain the male, who is presumed to be straight (Oliver, 2017). In most video games, the male gaze is

seen when the camera favors the stereotypical straight man by resting on the woman's body, either on the butt or the chest.

According to Ponterotto (2016), in a feminist theory, the male gaze is significantly impacted by the view of women from a male point of view, where women are depicted as mere sexual objects in favour of straight male viewers. The term was first introduced by Laura Mulvey in her essay, called "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema" (Ponterotto, 2016). However, Ponterotto observes that women tend to misuse the term "male gaze" to describe any sexual interaction with a man other than its initial meaning of seeing the world and women from a masculine perspective. The feminine theory argues that men are considerably awarded the advantage of having the freedom to explore their surroundings visually as they please (Mulvey, 2013). According to Mulvey (2016), the male gaze denies women their human identity of being viewed as female characters as they are positioned as objects of heterosexual man's desire using the film. She further argues that the female characters' feelings, sexual desires, and thoughts are overshadowed since they are made invisible while performing their acting roles.

Sexualization, a debatable topic since time immemorial, has attracted studies showing the effect of sexualization on women. According to the studies, the sexualization of women in video games has dramatically affected their involvement in playing the games because they feel misrepresented in the games or sometimes underrepresented (Starr & Ferguson, 2012). According to Ward (2016), the exposure of women to sexually objectifying media or games affects their feelings and thoughts about their bodies. He further states that women tend to feel like their bodies are stared at and evaluated by others. The media majorly plays the role of sexualizing women through advertisements and video games that solely focuses on the sexual attractiveness of women, leading to self-objectification and body shaming of females (Ward, 2016). It is argued that women playing video games with sexualized avatars leads to intense self-objectification compared to playing with avatars that are non-sexualized (Fox & Tricase, 2013). Moreover, according to Fox & Tricase (2013), women playing sexualized video games significantly showed dissatisfaction with their bodies. After playing the game, women depict lower body esteem due to idealized body shapes.

According to Cote (2017), the experiences of female gamers is an under-researched area as playing games are male dominated. Female gamers often experience harassment as they engage in the act of playing (Cote, 2017). The lack of enough research led to a lack of social support and increased harassment of female gamers, making them either play alone or anonymously, Cote argues. Recommendations for research to be conducted on the themes of

female gamers to offer possible explanations ought to be highly encouraged. The lack of research on female gamers' experiences with male-oriented games has left a void in the academic literature, leading to a lack of understanding about what it means to be a female gamer and how these demographic plays video games. The academic community needs to investigate the experiences of women gamers playing games that are considered male-oriented.

According to Cote (2017), this lack of research is problematic, as it perpetuates the idea that only men play video games and that women are not as interested in them. The study of video games has been primarily dominated by male scholars, who have tended to write about the experiences of male gamers. However, according to recent research, women are more likely than men to play both male-oriented and female-oriented games. This is because women tend to be more concerned with socializing than competitive gaming (Cote, 2017). Cote explains that the social nature of women translates to them playing both male and female-oriented games because they are not very much interested in the gaming but instead with the interactive part of the session. The phenomenon of female gamers playing male-oriented games is not new; scholars have documented it since at least the 1990s (Cote, 2017).

In the case of Bayonetta, she is depicted as a witch whose shape keeps changing. She performs magical attacks using her hair by sending demons to kill her enemies. She also uses various firearms in her fights. The game follows a plot of a witch who awakens from a 500-years slumber, not knowing her identity and without memories of her past (Bristol et al., 2019). She is only aware of her being a witch and that she possesses extraordinary powers. The themes in Bayonetta include mysterious destiny, alongside fly me to the moon against the theme of angels of Paradiso. Bayonetta's character is also attached to some queerness, where her hyper-femininity and increased confidence relate to the famous scenes in LGBTQ. Her first introduction tips it off, where she is depicted as a tall, slim lady wearing the traditional clothes of a nun that are suddenly ripped off her body as she groans and toe-tapping, a fastened remix of "fly me to the moon plays." As she throws kicks and punches, her body contorts into impracticable positions, "like the splits," before she spins her legs around like a helicopter, firing guns attached to her heels, and when she is done, she blows a kiss. The camera usage in Bayonetta is greatly ignored. However, the camera angle has been sexualized differently from most of the films where the female character is defeated. In Bayonetta, the camera focuses and zooms on the breasts of the main character. Camera angles tend to be sexualized since they film the female body features to accentuate them for desire arousal (Nitz et al., 2007).

The debate on whether Bayonetta is a powerful feminist icon or sex symbol has been a highly debatable topic soon as Bayonetta was released, criticism arose from the feminist media like Anita Sarkeesian, as seen in the video "nasty opinion" (Tompkins et al., 2020). She criticizes that Bayonetta as a protagonist was created to appeal to and satisfy the male gaze. No sooner Bayonetta was later claimed to be a queer icon and was perceived as a woman who had complete control over her sexuality (Ruberg, 2019). People in the queer community claimed the Bayonetta video game displayed content related to LGBTQ. According to Fasoli et al. (2018), Bayonetta being depicted as attractive from head-to-toe counts as sexualizing. This, of course, attracts the male gaze; however, Bayonetta has female features but the strength and responsibilities of a man. According to Lynch et al. (2016), Bayonetta's sexy imagery is part of her character; however, it portrays women as a sexist tool for heterosexual men.

The aim of this study is to analyse the experiences of female gamers playing the "Bayonetta" game series and how they make sense of their experiences. For this reason, the following research question was developed: "How do female gamers experiences playing the game series "Bayonetta"?". Moreover, this study also seeks to uncover the respective sub-questions: "How do female gamers define sexualisation?", "How do female gamers envision a feminist character?", and "How do female gamers experience the camera placements of Bayonetta's game design?". It is important to note that this study is going to analyse only the two parts of game series, since the "Bayonetta 3" was released after the conduction of interviews. For the purpose of answering the proposed research questions, this paper is going to adopt the following structure. The first part- Theoretical Framework- is going to uncover relevant theoretical overview on the topics that are appropriate for the study. The second part is Methodology which will explain how the research on the subject matter was executed. The following section- Results- presents the findings of the data analysis. Finally, the Conclusion part is going to summarize the results of the paper as well as state limitations of the research and possibilities of future research.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework part of this paper is going to explore and list important ideas that are relevant to this research, along with references to pertinent academic studies. The first section of this chapter is going to focus on the conceptualisation of the term “sexualisation”, the elements of sexual objectification, the way female characters are sexualised in video games, and gender stereotyping. The second part of the paper will uncover the topics of male and female gaze, effect of “gaze” in media on women, how media affects women in relation to media affect theories as well as the correlation between sexualisation and empowerment. The final part is going to explore the experiences of female gamers within the game community, the notion of feminist game design and the attributes of a feminist video game character.

### 2.1. *Discourse on sexualisation in media*

The conceptualisation of the term “sexualisation” has been a topic of debate in the academia since 1970s (Duschinsky, 2013). Within the feminist discourse, the concept of sexualization has been contested, as different feminist theories argued on what are the conditions of sexualisation along with how sexualisation impacts women. This section of the paper is going to elucidate different understandings of sexualisation as well as explore the critiques of sexualisation of women in media, particularly, in games.

The term “sexualisation” appeared to have been emerged, as a result of the combination of words “sexual” and “socialization” (Spanier, 1975). Thus, the term consists of two key themes: the "sexual" as any component of gender identity, physical growth, or erotic impulses and experiences, and "socialization" as a cognitive procedure of cultural indoctrination that begins during adolescence (Duschinsky, 2013). Spanier (1975) stated that the concept of “sexual socialization” or “sexualization” can be used interchangeably to describe three main components in an individual: development of gender identity; acquisition of sexual knowledge; and development of sexual attitudes. Consequently, the term sexualisation was used to describe the internal characteristics of an individual, such as identity, knowledge and values, and the ways in which that individual translates those characteristics in society. As a result, the discourse of sexualisation was, previously, concerned mostly with the way in which gender identity and sexual awareness of people were influenced through



socialization. However, relatively recent studies on sexualisation with the cultural sexualisation and the imposition of sexuality by others, specifically across media platforms. For instance, Gill (2007) defines sexualisation as the astonishing growth of discourses about sex and sexuality in all media as being a component of the "striptease culture" and to the rising frequency of erotic displays of girls', women's, and, to a lesser, extent men's bodies in public places. Thus, sexualisation is coded by Gill (2007), as a portrayal of women and men in media in an erotic way. A study conducted by (Renold and Ringrose, (2011), supports Gill's (2007) definition of sexualisation and proscribes nearly every single form of sexual expression (such as sexual desire) and associated issues (such as body image, sexual violence, etc.) as proof of "sexualization." However, Gill (2007) also claimed that in order to understand the implications of sexualisation, it is important to note that these sex messages in media are distributed in an uneven manner, even in a strongly heterosexual environment. As a result, men are portrayed as fragile, complex people in media marketed towards straight women, however, women seldom mention anything other than their underwear, sexual fantasies, "filthiest moments," or body parts in media aimed to those same men (Gill, 2007). Ultimately, the main issue around sexualisation revolves around the fact that in media women are commonly represented as "sex objects", which comes from the objectification factor. A supported study conducted by Liss et al., (2011), also stated that when people are treated as sex objects and only judged on their outer appearance, this is known as sexualization. As a consequence, sexualisation of women occurs when she is regarded as a "sex object", or in other words, sexually objectified. Nevertheless, the APA Task Force (2007), claimed that sexual objectification, which is implied as viewing a person merely through a lens of being of sexual use for others, is only one condition that happens during a sexualisation of a person. Other conditions involve equating person's value only to their sexual attractiveness; regarding person's physical appeal as "sexy"; and inflicting sexuality upon a person in an inappropriate manner (APA, 2007). While it could be challenging to define all the components that make up the term sexualization (Ward, 2016), there are clear definitions of what sexualisation does not constitute. Sexuality and sex are not equivalent, as sexualisation is just a component of sexism (Ward, 2016). It is a constrained frame of women that treats them as nothing more than sexual objects to be used for the sex enjoyment of others, thus, the act of sexualization is not reciprocal (Ward, 2016).

Nonetheless, the objectification factor is extremely present in a discourse of sexualisation. The definition of sexual objectification and its implications can be explained by the Objectification Theory proposed by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997). The objectification theory implies that when a woman's body is detached from her person, treated like a tool, or

treated as if it might reflect her, sexual objectification takes place (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). As a result, women are seen as bodies when they are objectified, and more specifically as bodies that are there for the enjoyment of others (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). The in which women get sexually objectified is through gaze, which can be through social interactions, meaning men look at women for the purpose of sexual evaluation, or with the help of visual media (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). The issue of male gaze in media is going to be thoroughly explored in the following section of this chapter. According to the objectification theory, women are socialized to view themselves as things to be examined and judged in our culture (Bennet et al., 2018). This implies that because of the objectification of women's bodies in culture, women are positioned to view themselves through the lens of the male gaze, resulting in self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Women tend to self-objectify themselves, which means they may absorb these ideas and like receiving sexual attention (Bennet et al., 2018). This observer's point of view, however, can encourage constant body checking, which raises feelings of guilt and stress and lowers awareness of internal physical issues (Cabras et al., 2018). As outlined by Cabras et al., (2018), Objectification Theory suggests that as a result of self-objectification, women may experience certain mental health problems, such as eating disorders, depression, and dysfunctional sexual behaviour. Yet, it is also important to note that the terms "sexualisation" and "self-objectification" are not synonymous, but rather self-objectification is just one example of how sexualization can occur (Ward, 2016). Nevertheless, according to the Objectification theory, sexual objectification can be manifested in two ways: direct and indirect. Indirect objectification, as explained above, can happen through gaze, particularly via male gaze. Yet, direct objectification encompasses all forms of sexual aggression (Fritz & Paul, 2017). One of the main issues of feminists opposed to pornography is sexual aggressiveness, referred as direct objectification (Fritz & Paul, 2017).

Objectification is unmistakably present in media genres like pornography, but "it is also pervasive in representations of women in mainstream media, such as TV shows, movies, music videos and lyrics, billboards, video games, and perhaps most noticeably, advertisements in magazines, newspapers, on TV, and online" (Gervais & Eagan, 2017, p.226). Whenever women are portrayed in media as objects, their bodies—particularly sexualized body parts like the chest, buttocks, thighs, and lips—are given more attention than their faces (Gervais & Eagan, 2017). Various content evaluations of video games and the discourse around them have repeatedly found that some titles (such as the enduring GTA and Mortal Kombat series) depict women in an objectifying way (Hollet, 2019). Particularly, this entails the enhancement of

sexual attributes (such as breasts and buttocks) and wearing provocative clothing (Hollet, 2019). Despite the fact that male characters can also be portrayed in a sexualized way in adult video games, such pattern is less visible for male characters in comparison to female characters (Hollet, 2019). Accordingly, some empirical data suggests that female characters in games aimed at adults are more likely to be sexualized (Hollet, 2019). The issue of portrayal of female characters comes down to stereotyping, as female heroines in game usually fall under certain stereotypes. A study conducted by Dill and Thill (2007), argued that female characters are depicted in various stereotypical ways, as the standard for female video game characters is that they are portrayed as sex objects that dress scantily, fit an idealized body type, and are ideals of beauty. In fact, more than 80% of female characters were shown in at least one of the three key stereotypes of women examined, such as sexualized, scantily clothed, and vision of beauty, and more than a quarter were represented in all three (Dill & Thill, 2007). Another study conducted by Kondrat (2015), claimed that the stereotype of "damsels in distress" and sexual objectification in video games is the most prevalent. The "damsels in distress" stereotype follows a narrative where a woman is not capable of saving herself and, thus, needs to be rescued or protected by a fellow male character. The sexual objectification of female characters is related to their design, in which they are often portrayed as almost nude or dressed seductively. Additionally, the study conducted by Miller and Summers (2007), found that male characters were much more likely to be represented as athletic and strong, while females were considerably more likely to be perceived as seductive and wearing exposing attire. Similarly, the same study showed that females were less likely to be main leads in games, in comparison to males (Miller & Summers, 2007). However, this suggestion was opposed by Kondrat (2015), as their study stated that there are an increasing number of games that aim to have female protagonists and evenly featured male characters. As a result, it appears that the scenario where women are primarily solely represented negatively (as mistress, damsel in distress, and sexual objects) is gradually changing and getting better (Kondrat, 2015).

The game industry is constantly developing, as more female heroines have appeared in various game titles, representing a positive change. (Lynch et al., 2016). Many debates on gender in video games centre on Lara Croft from Tomb Raider, since, despite the fact that oversexualized and subservient women have continued to appear in video games, the rise of characters like Lara Croft in the 1990s shows that there was a brief transitional period for female game characters (Perreault, 2016). Despite being sexualized in earlier iterations of Tomb Raider, the lead character is knowledgeable and in charge, making her a location of "gendered conflict" in video games (Perreault, 2016). Research conducted by Haslam (2019),

suggests that a prime example of both sexism and feminism in the game industry is Lara Croft from the Tomb Raider series and franchise. The character of Lara Croft was the first evident feminist figure in the game world, as she broke from the stereotypical “damsel in distress” depiction of female characters and was not only the main character, but also the driving force of the game narrative (Haslam, 2019). However, the main concern of this character was the fact that she was still predominantly sexualised in terms of her physical appearance, having an unrealistic representation of a woman’s body. Hence, even though a character may appear feminist, still such representation of women can be deemed as sexist. The term “ambivalent sexism” is used to describe such consequence. According to the ambivalent sexism perspective, there are two widely prevalent, antagonistic attitudes toward women that either assume men have de facto dominance, known as hostile sexism, or support patriarchy, regarded as benevolent sexism (Tompkins et al., 2020). When a woman is empowered by feminism or sexuality, hostile sexism portrays it as manipulative, perilous, and hostile (Glick & Fliske, 2001). One common feminine archetype that represents features of hostile sexism is the seductive femme fatale, that uses her sexuality as a tool against men (Tompkins et al., 2020). On the other hand, customarily, benevolent sexism views women as the beneficiaries and subservient receivers of men's action and attributes assertive traits to males, such as defensiveness, accountability, and authority (Glick & Fliske, 2001).

The character of Bayonetta has been deemed by researchers of having a hostile type of ambivalent sexism. For instance, a study conducted by Frischer (2018), concluded that as Bayonetta uses flirting as a tool to obtain valuable information from a male character, she embodies a hostile sexist character trait. Another study by Tompkins et al., 2020, labelled Bayonetta as an embodiment of a “femme fatale” trope and stated that she represents hostile sexism through her depiction as cunning sexual manipulator and perilous.

Although Bayonetta’s character is often labelled as being sexualised and inheriting the traits of hostile sexism, some researchers argued that such sexualisation is done for a specific purpose. For example, research conducted by Philips, 2020, stated that "Bayonetta's queerness offers her a latitude with femininity that enacts the radical potential of enticing, deflecting, and humiliating the male gaze.". Notably, the ways in which drag uses exaggeration, camp, and performativity to mirror and critique on current systems of representation, one way to understand Bayonetta is through the perspective of drag (Harper, 2015). According to Butler (1999), drag is an act that both mocks and criticizes our ideas of gender, but it also focusses on rationalising those ideas as well as our awareness of them. Thus, the component of irony is inherent in drag performance, as drag queens perform not

only to confront the traditional view of gender norms, but also to make fun of such norms. In relation to Bayonetta, the “excess” component is highly noticeable in her performance, which makes it appear as a drag performance (Harper, 2015). Bayonetta is characterised in the game as a performer, since her combat technique is cantered on exaggerated dance-like moves, her battle is defined by excess and being over the top, and her moves are big and theatrical when they don't need to be (Harper, 2014). Thus, Bayonetta is a rare example of a strong woman heroine trying to "shut down" the objectification gaze, by the exaggeration of female sexuality and using elements of parody and drag performance (Harper, 2015).

## *2.2. Male gaze and empowerment*

The male gaze describes how women are portrayed in media, particularly in video games (Finzsch, 2008). It is defined as how women are objectified and sexualized in media and are designed to appeal to a male audience (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009). There are many ways in which the male gaze can be seen in media, particularly video games. One of the most common ways is through advertising and marketing materials. Women are often shown in sexually suggestive or provocative positions and wear revealing clothing (Anupama & Chithra, 2022). Another way in which the male gaze can be seen in video games is by playing the games themselves (Hemmann, 2020). Female characters are often shown as being sexually available and submissive and used as a reward for the player. The male gaze can also be seen in how women are represented in the game industry (Sampson, 2017). Women are often under-represented in the industry, and when they are present, they are often shown in a sexualized or objectified manner. The aforementioned portrayals of women appeal to a male audience by making them appear more attractive and desirable.

There are many examples of the male gaze in media, particularly in video games. One example is how female characters are often portrayed as sex objects, with their clothing tight or revealing and their bodies highly sexualized (Hemmann, 2020). Again, female characters are often described as needing rescue by the male protagonist or as being weaker and less capable than the male characters (Hemmann, 2020). The male gaze is a problem in the gaming industry as it reinforces harmful stereotypes about women (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009).

The term “female gaze” is often used critically to discuss how women are objectified and sexualized in the media (Jose, 2017). Film critic Laura Mulvey first coined the term in her 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (Jose, 2017). In this essay, Mulvey argued

that mainstream cinema is designed to appeal to the male gaze, and women are often portrayed in a way that is designed to please men (Jose, 2017). This can include the objectification of women's bodies, the use of women as props or decorations, and the focus on women's sexuality. The term has since been applied to other forms of media, including video games. There is no definitive definition of the female gaze in video games, but it is generally used to describe how women are represented in games (Anupama & Chithra, 2022). This can include how women's bodies are portrayed, the roles women play in games, and how women's sexuality is exploited (Perloff, 2014). The male gaze and the predominate way that women are portrayed in the media are frequently used to define the female gaze. The male gaze typically objectifies and sexualizes women, portraying them as objects to be consumed by the male viewer (Perloff, 2014). In contrast, the female gaze emphasizes the pleasure and power women can derive from looking at and consuming images of other women (Perloff, 2014).

However, there are many different ways in which the female gaze can be seen in video games. One of the most common is the portrayal of women's bodies. Often, women in video games are shown in sexually suggestive or revealing clothing or positions that emphasize their physical attributes (Tompkins et al., 2020). This can be seen in games such as *Dead or Alive Xtreme Beach Volleyball*, in which the female characters are shown in skimpy bikinis and sexualized poses. Another example is the character of Bayonetta, who is often shown wearing revealing clothing and is designed to be sexually appealing to players (Anupama & Chithra, 2022). Another way the female gaze is evident in video games is through the roles women play. Often, women are portrayed as damsels in distress or as objects to be rescued by the male protagonist. This is a common trope in many actions and adventure games, such as the *Prince of Persia* series. In these games, the women are often portrayed as helpless and needing rescue, further objectifying them. Also, the female gaze is evident in video games through how women's sexuality is exploited (Lööf, 2015). This can be seen in games that feature sexual content, such as *Mass Effect 3*, which features a scene in which the player can choose to engage in a threesome with two female characters. It can also be seen in games that allow the player to purchase sexualized content, such as *The Sims 4*, which features many different adult-oriented items and outfits. The female gaze is a controversial topic in the world of video games. Some argue that it is a necessary and positive portrayal of women, while others say it is objectifying and degrading (Lööf, 2015). The truth is likely somewhere in the middle, and the female gaze will continue to be controversial for years.

Media effects theories attempt to explain how different media types can influence individuals' thoughts, emotions, and behaviours (Luong & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2017). There are various media effects theories, each of which has a different focus. Some of the most popular media effects theories include cultivation theory, social learning theory, and uses and gratifications theory. Cultivation theory posits that the more time an individual spends consuming media, the more likely they are to adopt the worldview presented in the media (Pennell & Behm-Morawitz, 2015). This theory was initially developed to explain how television can influence an individual's perceptions of reality. Social learning theory suggests that individuals can learn new behaviours by observing others in the media (Luong & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2017). This theory has often been used to explain how violence in the media can lead to aggression in real life. Uses and gratifications theory posits that individuals seek media that meets their needs and gratifications. This theory can be used to explain why individuals consume certain types of media content. Each of these theories has different implications for how media can influence women. Social learning theory posits that people learn by observing others and imitating their behaviour (Pennell & Behm-Morawitz, 2015). Thus, women exposed to media that portrays women in a certain way are more likely to adopt those behaviours. For example, suppose a woman sees a woman in a movie who is scantily clad and is portrayed as being sexually available. In that case, she is more likely to believe that that is how women are supposed to behave (Pennell & Behm-Morawitz, 2015). This can lead to her adopting that behaviour herself. Cultivation theory posits that the more time people spend consuming media, the more likely they are to believe the messages the media sends (Luong & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2017). Thus, women who consume a lot of media that portray women in a certain way, leading to them adopting the behaviours that they see.

Furthermore, cultivation theory suggests that the more time women spend consuming media, the more likely they are to adopt the worldview presented in the media (Anupama & Chithra, 2022). The media presents different worldviews, which are not conducive to gender equality. For example, the media often shows a very traditional view of gender roles, with women being portrayed as homemakers and men being portrayed as breadwinners (Biefeld et al., 2021). This conventional view of gender roles can influence women's perceptions of societal roles. Additionally, the media often presents a very idealized view of women's bodies, which can lead to body image issues among women (Biefeld et al., 2021). Social learning theory also has implications for how media can influence women. This theory suggests that women can learn new behaviours by observing others in the media. The media often portrays women as submissive to men and having little power in relationships (Pennell & Behm-

Morawitz, 2015). This portrayal of women can influence women's behaviour in relationships. Additionally, the media often portrays violence against women as acceptable. This portrayal of violence can make women more accepting of violence in their own lives. Uses and gratifications theory also affects how media can influence women (Anupama & Chithra, 2022). This theory posits that women seek media that meets their needs and gratifications. Women often consume media that reinforces their gender role stereotypes. For example, women often consume media that portrays them as homemakers and men as breadwinners (Gill, 2012). Additionally, women often consume media that reinforces their body image issues.

Moreover, media can also influence how they think about themselves and their bodies, how they behave in relationships, and how they are treated by others (Biefeld et al., 2021). One of the most obvious ways media affects women is how it influences their body image. Women are bombarded with images of thin, beautiful women in the media and are led to believe that this is the only acceptable way to look. This can lead to much distress and anxiety for women who do not fit this ideal and can even lead to eating disorders and other mental health problems (Anupama & Chithra, 2022). Again, in a way, it portrays them in relationships. Women are often shown as submissive and subordinate to men, and in relationships where they are abused or poorly treated (Biefeld et al., 2021). This can lead to women accepting this as normal behaviour and believing they deserve to be treated this way. It can also lead to women being less likely to report domestic violence or leave an abusive relationship, as they may believe that this is what they should do (Biefeld et al., 2021). It also affects the way others treat women. If women are constantly being portrayed as sex objects or as subordinate to men, this is how people will treat them (Gill, 2012). This can lead to women being objectified and treated as second-class citizens. It can also lead to sexual harassment and even violence against women.

The male gaze is a term used to describe how media is often created with a male perspective in mind (Finzsch, 2008). This can result in the objectification and sexualization of women and a lack of representation of women in general (Finzsch, 2008). Research has shown that the objectification of women in video games can negatively affect female players (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009). These effects include body image issues, self-esteem issues, and feeling disconnected from one's own body (Perloff, 2014). The objectification of women in video games often takes the form of sexualized character designs and gameplay mechanics that encourage players to view women as objects to be conquered or collected (Lööf, 2015).



This can make players feel entitled to control and abuse women in the game world. Additionally, it can give players the impression that women are only valuable for their sexual appeal and not as fully developed characters (Pennell & Behm-Morawitz, 2015). This can also hurt how female players see themselves. Studies (Perloff, 2014, Lööf, 2015) have shown that exposure to objectified images of women can lead to body image issues and decreased self-esteem. Additionally, objectification can lead to disconnection from one's body, as players may start seeing their bodies as objects to be displayed and conquered (Lööf, 2015). Generally, the objectification of women in video games can hurt women's representation in the gaming industry. When women are portrayed as sexual objects, it sends the message that they are not meant to be taken seriously as gamers or game developers (Pennell & Behm-Morawitz, 2015). This can discourage women from entering the gaming industry and participating in the gaming community. In light of this, objectifying women in video games may harm female players. Some of these consequences are issues with self-esteem, body image, and a sense of disconnection from one's own body (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009). Additionally, the objectification of women can lead to a feeling of entitlement among players and a decreased representation of women in the gaming industry.

The sexualization of female characters in the media has adverse effects on women. First, it reinforces the stereotype that women are primarily sexual objects, and second, it contributes to the objectification of women (Fasoli et al., 2018). The sexualization of women in the media is a problem because it reinforces the stereotype that women are primarily sexual objects. This stereotype is harmful because it suggests that women are only valuable for their sexual attractiveness and ignores their other qualities and achievements (Gill, 2012). It also contributes to the objectification of women. Objectification occurs when someone is treated as a thing or an object rather than a human being (Gill, 2012). When women are objectified, they are seen as objects for men's pleasure, and their worth is based on their physical appearance and sexual appeal (Fasoli et al., 2018). This can lead to self-esteem issues, body image problems, and a general feeling of being treated less than human. The way women are portrayed in the media directly impacts how they are viewed by society. When women are sexualized in the media, they are seen as objects rather than human beings. This objectification of women can lead to problems, such as body image issues, self-esteem issues, and a general lack of respect from society (Gill, 2012).

Some researchers argue that sexualization leads to objectification which is intrinsically misogynistic, while others claim that in such a way women can feel sexually liberated. Within the field of game studies, there is still lack of data to conclude the effect of sexualization of female characters on female gamers. Studies that have attempted to analyze this relationship have produced mixed results, with some finding that sexualized content can empower women, while others are finding that it can have the opposite effect. Some researchers argue that sexualization can empower women as it can help them explore and express their sexuality in a safe and controlled environment. For example, Gill (2012) found that women who played sexualized female characters in video games felt more comfortable talking about sex and their sexuality afterwards. Sexualization can be seen as a form of empowerment, allowing women to reclaim their sexuality and express themselves in a way that is not constrained by traditional gender roles. On the other hand, sexualization can also be seen as a form of objectification, as it can lead to women being seen as nothing more than sexual objects. It is important to note that not all forms of sexualization are necessarily negative. For example, suppose a woman dresses in a sexually revealing way. In that case, this can be seen as a form of empowerment, as she asserts her right to express her sexuality in a way that she feels comfortable with (Erchull & Liss, 2013). Similarly, if a woman chooses to engage in sexual activity, this can also be seen as a form of empowerment, as she is claiming her right to sexual pleasure.

However, there are also many highly problematic forms of sexualization. For example, if a woman is sexualized without her consent, this can be extremely harmful. This can happen when a woman is subjected to unwelcome sexual attention or is pressured into sexual activity that she does not want to engage in (Erchull & Liss, 2013). Also, if a woman is sexualised in a way that is degrading or objectifying, this can be harmful. This can happen when a woman is treated as nothing more than a sexual object or is expected to conform to a highly sexualised standard of beauty (Pennell & Behm-Morawitz, 2015). Other studies have found that women exposed to sexualized content are more likely to view themselves as sexual objects, which can lead to decreased body satisfaction and self-esteem (Erchull & Liss, 2013). However, other researchers have found that sexualization can negatively affect women, making them feel objectified and powerless. For example, one study found that women exposed to sexualized images of women were more likely to report lower levels of body satisfaction and self-esteem (Erchull & Liss, 2013). They also found that these women tended to agree with statements that objectified and dehumanized women. It is clear that the relationship between sexualization and empowerment is complex and contested. While some studies have found that sexualization can empower women, others have found that it can have adverse effects

(Pennell & Behm-Morawitz, 2015). This suggests that the impact of sexualization on women depends on factors, including the context in which it is encountered and the individual woman's interpretation of it.

### *2.3. Experiences of female gamers*

A study conducted by Perreault et al. (2018) affirms the trend of hypersexualized female protagonists. The study found that in games with a female protagonist, "93% of the games feature a sexualized woman, with 52% showing an explicit sex scene" (Perreault et al., 2018). With current trends continuing, girls and boys will continue to be exposed to these images and messages about what constitutes an acceptable role for women in video games. This study was linked to another survey by Cherney (2013), *Sexuality & Gender: New Perspectives on Women and Men*. In this study, hypersexuality is defined as the appearance of sex in a way that exceeds what the writer or artist perceives as accurate. The literature does not explain why sex and violence should be intertwined. Many games have a strong emphasis on violence without sexual content. Games are designed to be entertaining and to create emotions in the players. According to (Perreault et al., 2018), violence is associated with a level of suspense that can make players feel anxious, nervous, or even panic-stricken.

Tomlinson (2019) explores whether women are underrepresented as gamers, only to give a positive response that suggests that if they are, it is because they have different values and not a lack of interest in games. The article also provides evidence from studies suggesting that women who play online competitive games such as *League of Legends* outperform men. The author also provides a scenario of increasing the number of feminine gamers by supporting their concern in gaming. In addition, the article describes different elements for men and women playing games, concluding that men and women have different values, which could be due to different gender roles instead of being a result of the fact that women are not interested in games.

Research conducted by Phillips (2020) states that a lot of male gamers often treat female gamers as objects. *Women and computer games: In game studies in the new millennium*, the hostility towards female players is more significant than that against male players. The primary reason for this difference is that gamers are part of an online culture that reflects real-life patriarchal norms. It is no surprise that male players are more likely to harass female players. This is because they view women as inferior and treat them with less respect. For example, Gamergate controversy in 2014, a massive cyber-militant crusade against

feminism took place, which predominantly targeted female gamers and provoked them. Phillips adds that women also face harassment when using their gamer identity outside their homes and in public places (Phillips, 2020). The gamer identity is an essential aspect of the women's culture, but at the same time, it's a symbol of masculinity and competence in masculinity.

Women are often not seen as legitimate gamers. They are ignored, ostracized, and humiliated by their male counterparts in the gaming community. Women have been called derogatory names, like slut, for instance, for their gaming style. Women Gamers is an international grassroots campaign created to explore the experiences of female gamers worldwide. The campaign provides resources, advice, and storytelling to women who want to share their own stories about gender dynamics in video game culture. Some of the experiences of female gamers in video game communities include the objectification of female gamers due to their gender or physical appearance (Tomlinson, 2019).

Secondly, female gamers experience objectification by their male counterparts, often due to their gender or their physical appearance. Negative comments about women's gaming habits, appearance, and skill level may lead to demeaning remarks about gender identity or expression. Consequently, the third is the harassment of women on voice chat by male gamers. Using the voice chat feature is often a trigger for abuse, harassment, bullying, and Sexual Assault in the form of violent or sexual threats. In addition, the sexualization of female gamers by male gamers in voice chat and through virtual environments creates a sexualized environment women are forced to navigate. Sexist language and slurs are used against women as control mechanisms. Lastly, women are not being taken seriously as players, except for sex appeal. Female gamers have also been criticized simply because they are women who play video games, not because they are bad at games themselves or lack skill (Perreault et al., 2018).

In studies on gaming, men players of all ages have received the most attention. Below 30% of the respondents in the Fox and Tang (2017) research have been female, with the bulk of respondents being men. The perspective of female gamers has lately been the subject of several discussions. These primarily pertain to the experiences of female gamers, a minority group expanding in online venues. Past studies have emphasized the significance of games in female gamers' life and the potential increase in female engagement in online playing when they play with essential males and relatives (Fox & Tang, 2017).

Early studies looked at gender variations in internet gaming interpersonal relationships and proposed that social incentives change according to gender. According to some studies, such sex discrepancies may be caused by socialization issues, videogame architecture, or gender-specific ability disparities (Kaye & Pennington, 2016). Similarly, female gamers have emphasized the importance of peripheral interaction, which takes place beyond the gaming itself. Examples include discussing gaming encounters with key individuals in their existence and connecting with like-minded individuals on discussion boards (Kaye & Pennington, 2016).

Ballard and Welch (2017) state that women are frequently seen as a minority in internet gaming environments and that the evidence continuously shows that they often encounter social and sexual assault from other gamers. According to a recent study by Fox and Yeng Tang (2017) on feminist issues with digital video games, bullying was frequently followed by reflection on the incident, a sense that there was no attention paid to the problem, and disengagement from the competition. Women described unique defense techniques to lessen abuse, such as concealing their identities, refraining from interacting with other gamers, and asking for assistance or social support within and without the gaming.

According to Ballard and Welch (2017), male players are more inclined to respond negatively toward women and participants in lower-performing online games. Male gamers are more prone than female players to engage in online bullying. Additionally, those who identified as LGBT or female indicated a considerably greater incidence of sex-based cyber-victimization. A small percentage of online gamers who were self-selected for the study were female. The rating of gaming accomplishments was the most frequently given justification for indulging in harmful behavior.

Recent studies have examined the causes of this perception of video game chauvinism (Fox & Tang, 2017). According to the research, having a social control attitude and adhering to specific masculine standards (wanting to dominate women and needing to seem as heterosexual) were associated with greater degrees of sexism. According to Vermeulen and Looy (2016), stereotype danger affects women's gaming experiences. The study evaluated the impacts of promoting stereotypes that women are worse skilled gamers against the impacts of challenging these stereotypes in a regulated controlled experiment. They discovered that gaming behaviors, competition as a characteristic, and gamer identification all affect how social identity danger is felt. Further highlighting the detrimental effects of stigmatization on female gamers, Kaye and Pennington (2016) observed that

females underperformed on the playing objective compared to men in the controlled group. Similar results with implications for females' competence assessment and well-being have been published.

The “Me-Too” movement, which addresses sexual abuse and exploitation, is forcing the games industry, which has long grappled with diversity and equality concerns and frequently lagged behind other industries, to face its reality (Lanier, 2019). In addition to making the workplace a site of conflict, many corporate video games also feature harmful depictions of socially excluded individuals and sensationalized brutality. Nevertheless, there are alternatives to this rule, and truly innovative and forward-thinking games are being produced (Lanier, 2019).

Legendary ruptures like GamerGate and the Penny Arcade Dickwolves controversies are frequently cited as proof that the video game sector and the broader position of games in society are in despair and in need of restructuring. These issues also affect game design courses, as the gaming industry and the game design industry both have dreadful track records when it comes to issues of diversity and equality. Lately, professors of games have discussed how the negativity traditionally connected with gaming culture permeates their classrooms and serves as a malevolent force aimed at the teachers individually, in addition to making learning challenging for other learners (Vermeulen & Looy, 2016).

The key conclusions of Sarkeesian and Cross (2015) demonstrated that video games could improve women's intellectual, interpersonal, and physical capacities. However, they are less likely to play video games due to harmful gender norms and terrible gaming experiences. In general, video games are linked to sexualized imagery and stereotypically violent masculine behaviors in males, among other things. It appears that female gamers require evolutionary defenses against cyberbullying. Female players' video game interests are diverse, which can limit the possibility of new games. For instance, excessively female imagery and overly sexualized material can have a detrimental effect on their enjoyment by causing societal criticism, a sense of self-worth loss, depression, and other undesirable feelings. Women still encounter challenges in the gaming industry while making up a small portion of the population (Sarkeesian & Cross, 2015).

The views and practices of females playing avatars in digital games made up the second significant issue in this review by Perreault et al. (2018). The findings show that female actors are spotlighted less commonly in gameplay than men. Their depiction also regularly emphasizes their female characteristics in an overstated and overtly sexually suggestive way

that may severely affect female players' perceptions of their bodies. According to Perreault et al. (2018), featuring significant female figures on the box art of video games lowers sales. Hypersexualized female game figures may negatively affect players' self-perceptions and attitudes, affecting their relationships with others and how they are perceived beyond the game. According to Sarkeesian and Cross (2015), certain video games promote the rape narrative by encouraging aggression against and the sexual abuse of women.

Young and Whitty (2017) investigated why prohibitions, such as sexual assault, are disobeyed in video games and highlighted how the liberties provided by these mediums might have a detrimental effect on players and their relationships with others in everyday life. Aggression against a player's avatar is upsetting because players can create emotional relationships with their virtual selves. When creating video games, game creators must seriously reconsider whether to include female actors with overstated female characteristics and victimization. Hypersexualized female organs and encouraging aggression against female actors in games may negatively affect players' attitudes toward themselves, everyone else, and their interrelations with women.

In conclusion, despite an increase in female players, modern video games must adequately cater to female gaming goals and gaming-related preferences. According to the results of this descriptive literature study by Skowronski et al. (2021), the gaming sector must give female players' demands and preferences more consideration because they represent a significant and growing segment of the market (Fox & Tang, 2017). Additionally, it is essential to promote research that focuses on the motives of female players in addition to the psychosocial effects of in-game aggression and the over-sexualization of female players on their psychological health, well-being, and general gameplay perspective.

### **3. Methodology**

This chapter is going to provide a detailed description of how the research on the experiences of female gamers playing “Bayonetta” was executed. The qualitative method of in-depth interviews was used for the purpose of uncovering the primary research question: “How do female gamers experience the game design of “Bayonetta” game series?”. In an effort to gather the required information for the study, the researcher conducted interviews on ten female gamers that played at least one part of “Bayonetta” game series. The interviews were organized and recorded via the online video conferencing platform Zoom and, later, transcribed individually for further analysis. Thematic analysis was chosen as the method of data analysis for this study. The researcher executed thematic analysis in accordance with the steps indicated by Braun and Clarke (2006) that will be explored further in this chapter. Ultimately, the themes were developed from data using thematic analysis and compiled in a codebook to help to answer the abovementioned research question with respective sub-questions. Furthermore, the methodological structure of this research was based on Kvale’s (2007) seven stages of interview inquiry that includes: thematising, designing, interviewing, transcribing, analysing, verifying and reporting. The first step of the proposed methodological guidelines that consists of formulation of the aim of the research along with the collection of relevant theoretical framework was uncovered in the previous chapters. The “Methodology” part of this paper is going to explore the remaining stages of the methodological structure extensively as well as present the rationale behind the implementation of chosen methods.

#### *3.1. Research Design*

Previous studies on the experiences of female gamers in the gaming field (McLean & Griffiths, 2018; Kuss et al., 2022; Griffiths & Lewis, 2011; Assunção, 2016) implemented qualitative type of research analysis. The data collection methods of these studies comprised of either online discussion forums or in-depth interviewees. According to Kuss et al., 2022, the rationale behind the usage of in-depth interviews is the fact that interviewees allow for a deeper understanding of perspectives and experiences of female gamers with video games. A similar study conducted by Schott and Horrell (2000), that analyzed the experiences of female gamers in gaming platforms, justified the usage of in-depth interviews as an appropriate method of data collection. To be precise, it is argued that interviews were the major research approach used to provide a detailed description of the experiences of female gamers (Schott & Horrell, 2000). Moreover, thematic analysis was the primary method of data analysis in all



of these studies. The research conducted by McLean and Griffiths (2018), grounding their arguments on the study by Braun and Clarke (2007), stated that thematic analysis facilitates flexibility and depth in the evaluation of participants' feelings and motivation.

Due to the fact that this study is also aimed at uncovering the experiences of female gamers, qualitative type of research was deemed as more suitable within the scope of this study. Qualitative methods are comprised of data collection and interpretation approaches that focus on exploring a research question through a humanistic approach, meaning that such method provide the focus of study on people, human interpretation, and human behaviors (Pathak et al., 2013). Hence, such research approach is employed when the researcher seeks to explain social phenomena, particularly understanding people's beliefs, behavior, attitudes, and experiences. As described by Sofaer (1999), qualitative research is appropriate for studying and assessing people's understanding, perception, and experience of social phenomena. Essentially, the focus of qualitative methods is to uncover questions such as "what" and "why" people think in a certain way. Therefore, in contrast to quantitative research, qualitative methods are used for examining certain phenomena in-depth, since the process of qualitative data collection is not bound by predetermined categories of analysis (Patton, 1987). As outlined by the research questions of this study, the primary objective of this paper is to analyze the experiences of female gamers playing the "Bayonetta" series as well as their perceptions of certain issues that are present in the game, it is evident that this research lends itself towards a qualitative nature of study.

Moreover, the researcher selected in-depth interviews as a suitable method of analysis, instead of other methods, such as surveys, due to several reasons. According to Showkat and Parveen (2017), in-depth interviews, as a useful method of collecting primary data, are conducted to learn more about the interviewee's experience and viewpoint on a particular topic. In comparison to focus groups that are aimed at determining a selected set of people's perceptions and opinions of an investigation's focus, in-depth interviews are an effective qualitative technique for eliciting people's feelings, beliefs, and experiences (Milena et al., 2008). Thus, it provides an opportunity to learn more about how people perceive and organize the world (Milena et al., 2008). Moreover, one of the most essential advantages of in-depth interviews is that they assist to discover more detailed and in-depth information than other data collection methods such as surveys yet being more effective and less regimented (Showkat & Parveen, 2017). Hence, it is evident that in-depth interviews were chosen as the data collection method, essentially, because of the usefulness of in-depth interviews in cases when thorough information about a participant's experiences is examined.

On the other hand, surveys also provide a rich and comprehensive view of a certain topic. Surveys, which include prepared questions with a limited range of replies and little room for interpretation, are conducted using structured interviews (Brennen, 2021). In order to accurately aggregate responses and enable comparisons between the many survey periods, structured interviews are generally conducted using the same questions in the same sequence. Since this approach asks the same questions to every responder, suggesting that trends can be seen and replies easily compared - surveys are simple to repeat to ensure the reliability of the data. Nonetheless, surveys harbor some downsides. For instance, they allow for limited participant responses as the respondents may be limited to what answers they can provide. In contrast to surveys, semi-structured and unstructured interviews are advantageous for greater flexibility and an in-depth understanding of certain issues. Semi-structured interviews, for instance, rely on a series of important questions to help identify the topics to be investigated while enabling the researcher or responder to stray from these questions to give a more in-depth response. (Gill et al., 2008). Hence, a semi-structured interview is relatively open since it permits new ideas to be raised based on the respondents' responses. This approach enables the researcher to elaborate on information that is important for the participants, but that was not originally considered relevant by the research team.

Within the scope of this study, the researcher conducted interviews of semi-structured type, since it allows for greater flexibility in terms of the flow of the conversation. Semi-structured interviews aided the researcher in the investigation of experiences of female gamers as well as allowed the participants to extensively describe their perceptions of certain issues. Such type of interviews enabled the researcher to have a list of predetermined questions that were an ancillary element in the process along with provided freedom for the researcher to direct the flow of the interview. In this study, there was an interview guide that consisted of several open-ended questions, allowing the interviewees to develop on their views and arguments themselves and introduce new ideas that the researcher had not considered before. The interview guide can be found in Appendix A of this paper. Since qualitative research, unlike quantitative research, is not aimed at the generalization of the results, many researchers argued that sample size of 5 to 50 participants is considered adequate for in-depth interviews (Dworkin, 2012). Therefore, within the scope of this study, ten women from various countries were interviewed on their experiences with the “Bayonetta” series. This research is comprised of ten interviewees that were all conducted and recorded through online video conferencing platform Zoom. Due to the fact that all participants were from different parts of world, the

interviewees were done in English language. Afterwards, the interviewees were transcribed manually by the researcher for further analysis.

### 3.2. Sampling

#### 3.2.1. Units of analysis

The second stage of Kvale’s (2007) is the process of designing that involves the creation of an interview guide as well as the establishment of sampling criteria. The sample of this study is comprised of women that are over the age of eighteen in order to comply to the age rating of “Bayonetta” game series. Furthermore, all the participants should have played at least one part of the game franchise, for the purpose of providing comprehensive answers during the interview. As mentioned previously, this paper analyses only the two parts of the “Bayonetta” game series, due to the fact that the third part was released after the interviews were conducted. Ultimately, the units of analysis for this research were composed of women aged between 19 to 34 that were either residing in the United States of America or European countries. The occupations of participants were varied, as three out of ten interviewees were students, while others were employed in different fields. Only one participant was currently in the process of finding a job. Interestingly, nine out of ten participants claimed that they have played both parts of “Bayonetta” franchise and are eager to buy the third part after its release. As a result, the data acquired from the interviewees, generally, consisted of both parts of the franchise. In addition, all the participants regarded themselves as “gamers” because they have played video games since they were young.

The sample description table is presented below:

Referred as	Interview date	Sex	Age	Country	Occupation
Interviewee 1	13/09/2022	Female	22	The USA	Software engineer
Interviewee 2	15/09/2022	Female	19	Wales	Cashier, freelance artist
Interviewee 3	15/09/2022	Female	19	The USA	Unemployed

Interviewee 4	16/09/2022	Female	23	The Netherlands	Student
Interviewee 5	17/09/2022	Female	34	The USA	Librarian
Interviewee 6	18/09/2022	Female	30	The Netherlands	Financial Administrative worker
Interviewee 7	20/09/2022	Female	24	Poland	Retail worker
Interviewee 8	21/09/2022	Female	30	The USA	Kindergarten teacher
Interviewee 9	25/09/2022	Female	27	The USA	Student
Interviewee 10	3/10/2022	Female	22	England	Student

### 3.2.2. Sampling strategy

Within the framework of this study, recruitment posts were uploaded on different gaming platforms and communities, such as Discord and Reddit. The recruitment posts were shared on specific channels and communities that were either related to “Bayonetta” series or comprised of mainly female gamers. The Discord platform was the initial choice of the researcher to gather the relevant sample, due to the fact that it is one of the most popular communication platforms among gamers and was first developed to provide gamers with audio and text communication channels. Statistically, Discord is used by 36% of survey participants from the United States who play video games daily or once a week (Clement, 2022). The researcher posted recruitments for the interviews on following Discord channels: “Bayonetta Community Server”, “The Umbran Clan”, “Bayonetta”, “Cuhrayzee”, “The Bayonetta Lab Corner”. The Discord postings lead to only four people being recruited for the interview, as most of the Discord users felt uncomfortable about the recording aspect of the interview. For this reason, the researcher decided to use Reddit as an alternative communication platform to obtain the desired number of participants. Reddit is another popular social network where users can create communities based on their interests. The researcher posted recruitments for the interviews on the respective Reddit communities: “r/Bayonetta”, “r/GirlGamers”, “r/Nintendo”. As a result, the posts on Reddit facilitated four

more participants for the interview. Since the desired number of participants was not yet reached, the researcher decided to adopt a snowball sampling method, meaning that the recruited participants were asked to provide the contact information of people that were suitable for the sampling criteria. As a consequence, the application of a snowball sampling method led to two more people being recruited for the interview.

### *3.2.3. Data collection*

As discussed above, the interviews were conducted through an online video communications platform Zoom, due to the fact that the participants were from different countries. After the unprecedented events of COVID-19, the culture of working from home was normalized, leading to people getting used to communicating through software, such as Zoom. A study conducted by Oliffe et al., (2021) discovered that in the post-COVID-19 era, the participants of their research were radiating naturalness and spontaneity, as they were able to speak openly and freely about their experiences and feelings during the Zoom interview. This finding suggests that after the pandemic, people adapted to communicating professionally or about sensitive issues within the comfort of their home.

Ultimately, 10 interviews were conducted and recorded via Zoom, lasting for approximately 35 to 60 minutes. Zoom was selected by the researcher, as an interview platform, mainly due to its ease of use along with the in-built capacity of voice and video recording. However, there are more benefits to Zoom, in comparison to other video communications software. For instance, Zoom's capability to securely record and save sessions without the use of external software is deemed as one of its primary advantages (Archibald et al., 2019). This functionality is especially crucial in studies when it is necessary to protect extremely confidential material and can make participants more confident that their personal information will not get leaked to a third-party application. User-specific identification, real-time conference encryption, and the capacity to save recordings to online remote server networks (the cloud) or local files, which may later be transferred safely for teamwork, are further crucial security attributes of Zoom (Archibald et al., 2019). Furthermore, unlike other communication software, interviewees are not obliged to install any software or create an account to use Zoom, which offers more flexibility for participants (Gray et al., 2020). Hence, only the researcher must have the Zoom application downloaded in order to access its features, such as voice recording.

In relation to this study, several benefits were spotted, as a result of conducting interviews online. Firstly, the primary benefit of Zoom interviews was that it allowed for the researcher to access a sample of participants from across the globe, hence, increasing the inclusivity of the study as well as reducing its costs. Moreover, the researcher noticed that the participants felt comfortable during online interviews since they were not obliged to open their cameras and could leave the interview at any time, which might be less frightening than doing so after an in-person interview in an unknown environment (Gray et al., 2020). Nevertheless, online interviews lack in establishing rapport, in contrast to face-to-face interviews, making it difficult for the research to create a safe environment in the course of an interview. Therefore, certain strategies need to be formed to combat that issue. A study conducted by Deakin and Wakefield (2013) recommended numerous emails be exchanged between the participants and the interviewer before the online interview to assist in establishing rapport. For this reason, before the execution of interviews, the researcher was communicating with the participants via Discord or Reddit messengers, or emails. Another study by Archibald et al., 2019, suggested that participants frequently indicated that being able to see the researcher and react to nonverbal cues was crucial to developing rapport, forging connections with others, or providing "a personal touch." Therefore, the researcher kept their video on for every interview, for the purpose of making the interviewees feel more comfortable and, as a result build rapport with the participants. It is also argued by Brennen (2021) icebreakers can assist in creating a non-judgmental environment for the participants. Thus, the interview guide also included various icebreaking questions, such as what games do, they usually play or their top three games of all time (Appendix A), for the purpose of building rapport with an interviewee.

### *3.3. Operationalisation*

Before the start of the interviews, background information of the participants was collected, and consent form was explained and distributed. The consent form described the aims of the research, its guidelines, such as obligatory voice recording of interviews as well as the monetary compensation. The consent form is attached in Appendix B of this paper. The participants were required to read the consent form thoroughly and sign it and send it back to the researcher. The interviewees began with icebreaker questions that asked about participants' experience in gaming and their preferences. Afterwards, the participants were asked broad questions about the "Bayonetta" series, such as what encouraged them to play it

or if they played both parts of the franchise. With the help of these questions, the researcher was able to understand the interviewees' general attitude in relation to the game series.

The interview guide (Appendix A) of this study revolved around five major topics. The first one was concerned with how the participants experienced the gameplay in terms of main character's design, both aesthetically and personality wise, and the general game environment, including camera placements. Moreover, participants were asked if there were any distinguishing features that set this game apart from others with female leads. The second part was aimed at discovering how the interviewees perceived the main character of the game, whether in their opinion the character is sexualized and how they make sense of the term "sexualization". The third section was solely related to their understanding of empowerment and their perspectives on sexualization as a source of empowerment. The following section delved into understanding what the term "feminism" meant to participants and how they imagine the feminist character in media. The last part was trying to uncover the experiences of female gamers in the game community and how the inclusion of more feminist characters can change the course of the video game industry. Finally, the researcher asked the participants if they wanted to change anything in "Bayonetta" game series and if they would recommend playing the game to other women. Essentially, the implementation of semi-structured interviewees with the inclusion of appropriate interview guide, allowed the researcher to dig deeper into the perceptions and experiences of female gamers playing the "Bayonetta" franchise.

#### *3.4. Data Analysis*

Once the interviews were conducted, they were transcribed manually by the researcher for further data analysis. Within the scope of this study, thematic analysis was used as the primary method for data analysis. The justification behind the implementation of thematic analysis is described thoroughly below.

According to Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis is a method that is aimed at detecting, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data that will be, subsequently, organized and described. This approach enables the comprehension of specific themes that may be essential to the research topic. A theme depicts an organised response or meaning within the data set and highlights a particular aspect of the data that is pertinent to the research topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes are made up of codes that have a common point of

reference and a strong feeling of generality that tie concepts related to the study issue together (Vaismoradi et al., 2016).

Every theme may comprise of particular sub-themes as subcategories in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the content and identify a trend in the data. Themes can be established by using either inductive or deductive approaches. The coding in thematic analysis can also be categorized into two approaches: 1) semantic coding and 2) latent coding. While the latter reflects implicit meanings and is positioned on a deeper level of analysis, the former stands for codes that are more apparent in meaning and are highlighted at the surface level of the data (Terry et al., 2017). Additionally, semantic coding frequently involves an inductive process, whereas the deductive method is primarily focused on latent coding. However, it is crucial to mention that due to the present theoretical framework around the topic of this study, a researcher cannot conduct the study totally inductively or code the data exclusively on identified latent meanings. As argued by Braun & Clarke (2006), since data is not coded in an epistemological vacuum and researchers cannot be independent of their theoretical and epistemological preconceptions, it is feasible to combine both of the aforementioned methodologies in thematic analysis. Hence, this study implements thematic analysis using a more inductive oriented approach, yet, also acknowledging the deductive aspect of this analysis.

Thematic analysis is a stepwise approach consisting of six steps. These steps include familiarizing with data, generating initial codes, creating themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and reporting (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). During The first step the researcher did a in-depth review of the collected data by reading through the interview transcriptions. The second step involved coding the data. Here, the researcher highlighted sections of the text using phrases, sentences, or short labels to describe the data. It is important to note that the researcher conducted thematic analysis manually by the use of colour coding, meaning that each code was given a certain colour. Step three entailed identifying patterns among the codes created and then tagging themes, consequently, several codes were grouped into themes. For instance, the codes, such as sexuality as a tool, body confidence and appealing attitude were all categorised under the sub-theme “flaunted sexuality”. In the next phase, the themes were reviewed to ensure they represent the data precisely. Such step involved modifying and developing the themes identified in the previous stage (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Step five is the final step of refining the themes that required devising clear and succinct names. During this stage, the researcher assigned the sub-theme of “flaunted sexuality” to a main theme



“empowerment”. Moreover, the codebook was created to clearly convey the titles of the themes and subthemes. The codebook is included in the Appendix B of this paper. Finally, the completed analysis was described in the “Results” section of this study.

#### **4. Results**

The findings of the thematic analysis of the conducted interviews on ten female gamers that have an experience of playing “Bayonetta” are presented in this section. All of the interviews were conducted via online communication platform Zoom, and, later, transcribed by the researcher manually. As a result of thematic analysis, the table of codes was assembled that provided a thorough overview of the primary topics and concerns of the interviewees of the study. The codes generated throughout the research allowed to extensively comprehend the experiences of women playing “Bayonetta”. The codes were compiled into sub-themes and later categorized into themes that aided in uncovering the research objective of this study. As mentioned above, the research aim of this study is to analyze the experience of female gamers playing the game “Bayonetta”. The respective sub-questions of this study are: “How do female gamers define sexualisation?”, “How do female gamers envision a feminist character?”, and “How do female gamers experience the camera placements of Bayonetta’s game design?”. Ultimately, after the thematic analysis was conducted, the following themes were established. The first theme is called “Beyond the male gaze” and it involves the sub-themes: *purposeful sexualisation, respectful design and game tone*. The second theme is named as “Feminist character” and includes the sub-themes: *sexual liberation, independency and equality*. The final theme “Empowerment” was established with respective sub-themes: *confidence, flaunted sexuality and power*.

##### *4.1. Beyond the male gaze*

The concepts of oversexualization or hyper sexualization was primary within the scope of this research, since, as extensively discussed above, the heated debate in media on how sexualization of female characters in video games, “Bayonetta” in particular, is targeted specifically for pleasing the male audience. Hence, sexualization of the character of “Bayonetta” and the stance of female gamers on such matter was one of the key priorities for the researcher to uncover. The researcher’s aim was to initially understand how the interviewees conceptualise the term “sexualisation”. When asked about how the participants

describe a sexualised character, the answers revolved around the theme of body proportions. Even though all the respondents agreed that Bayonetta is a sexy character, they also stated that Bayonetta does not have an overly exaggerated body proportions, such as large breasts, wide hips that can make her look unrealistic. Furthermore, interviewees pointed out that the character is fully covered in clothes all the time, apart from certain fighting scenes where she needs to use her special power where is depicted almost naked.

“I've heard a lot of people say that she's sexualized, but I think it's kind of nice that she's sexy but not overly sexualized in my opinion. She has a catsuit, which is pretty sexy. But then she doesn't have an anime style, weird proportions, where they have giant, unnatural boobs and stuff like that. Her body type, she has normal-sized breasts and her breasts are covered the whole time, unlike anime characters where they have all this cleavage. So, I think she's sexy but she's still modest.” (Interviewee No. 5)

“If I'm being honest, her design, I don't think it's necessarily sexual. Now, the fact that her clothes come off and she gets naked while she's fighting, yes, that part is sexual. Okay. Well, she doesn't have large breasts. She doesn't have wide hips. She does walk and talks and exudes sexuality. But if you just look at her character, you wouldn't go, "Oh, this is a character that's made sexy just for the male gaze." (Interviewee No.

8)

Hence, the conceptualisation of the term sexualisation is deemed by the respondents as primarily an exaggeration of the character's physical features. Sexualization of Bayonetta's character was not illustrated in her physical appearance but rather in her attitude or the manner in which the heroine presented herself. Consequently, all the respondents believe that during certain combat scenes, Bayonetta does get sexualised, however, they claim that it is not necessarily a bad thing, as there is rationale behind it.

“Sexualization shouldn't have to be demonized at every turn. Why shame a woman who wants to feel sexy every so often? And what better place to be as sexy as you want other than fiction? And what better way to be sexy than using that charm to feel empowered and destroy your enemies while looking your classiest? If people are angry a woman wants to be sexy in a video game, then obviously Bayonetta is not the game for them.” (Interviewee No. 9)

“She is sexualized, yeah. But I don't feel she is inappropriately over-sexualized.” “It feels organic to her character” (Interviewee No. 6)

The participants argued that the way in which Bayonetta gets sexualised, primarily via the combat scenes, does not feel inappropriate, but rather as an intrinsic part of her character.

When the researcher was asking the interviewees to describe Bayonetta's character, the commonly appeared themes were classy, sassy, sexy, confident and powerful. The participants concluded that because the character's personality includes the traits of being sassy, sexy and confident, her extravagant appearances during fight scenes feel appropriate. Therefore, the participants view such sexualisation during the combat as not forced for the purpose of appealing to the male audience, but rather organic to her personality, thus, not problematic. The Interviewee No. 1, particularly conceptualised the term "male gaze" as a process of ignoring the narrative and the character, but rather focusing solely on the physical features of a female heroine, which is not the case with Bayonetta, as the character development is central to the game plot.

"I feel like when we talk about things like sexualizing female characters and male gaze degrading from story or artistic intent, it's less about the sexualization and more about the failure to make it a part of the rest of the, of the work the male gaze is when a movie or a video game completely stops. And you're just buried in the spectacle of a woman's body instead of considering the other aspects of the work that it's kind of being worked into" (Interviewee No. 1)

In addition, the term "purposefully sexualized" occurred repeatedly throughout interviews that was used to describe the idea that the main character was sexualized for reasons other than the appeal for the male audience, such as to detach the stigma around the sexualisation of women in media. The Participant No. 1, particularly, noted that it is important to take into account the historical background of the game. The narrative of the game and its worldbuilding were not taken into consideration in any of the earlier studies on "Bayonetta. The story of "Bayonetta" takes place in a very patriarchal world where the main character has to fight against misogyny in order to defend her values. The Interviewee No.1 stated that:

"A lot of the story of Bayonetta is concentrated around male, God-like figures, kind of representing patriarchy in society that are taking her power, abusing her power and trying to sequester her into a specific role. The character, like I said, was conceptualised as a way to kind of speak out against patriarchal restrictions on women's bodies and on their behaviour. It is her using her sexuality as a tool, you know, kind of over these male characters as well as, just as a poignant point of self-expression. It is a part of her style and her beauty, that is integrated into her identity."

Hence, the sexualization part of the character, as outlined by the respondent, can be viewed through the lens of battling against the constraints on female sexuality and behaviours imposed by the patriarchy. Additionally, many participants expressed their opinion that the

game was designed to detach the stigma of sexuality of nudity as a negative stance. Moreover, all the interviewees were aware of the fact that Bayonetta's character was designed by a woman. Some of the respondents expressed their position that Bayonetta was designed in a respectful way, implying that the character was not made for the purpose of sexual objectification.

“I think women designers can objectify but I think she was doing it for her own ideas rather than trying to objectify her.” (Interviewee No. 5)

Some participants claimed that the portrayal of the character did not feel as sexually objectified, because the feeling of consent was present throughout the game. The consensual sexualisation of Bayonetta was explained by the participants through the lens of viewing the character as very confident and in control of her sexuality. Therefore, she was seen as giving consent to being sexualised, since she is a sexually open character, subsequently, such sexualisation does not feel imposed on her, but rather organic to her personality.

“The character herself, she's so confident about it but she also shows that she's a human with insecurities and stuff. So in a way, it feels like you're looking at her, but it's with consent. So then, it doesn't feel that bad but it's still sexualized.” (Interviewee No. 4)

However, there were also participants that disagreed with the statement above and claimed that a fictional character cannot give consent, thus, making it difficult to view the character as giving consent to being sexualised. Nevertheless, those participants also argue that the fact that Bayonetta's character is not looked down upon and is not depicted merely as a “sex object” throughout the game, concludes that she was designed in a respectful way.

“It's kind of a gray area because within the game's canon, it's supposed to be that she's consenting but at the same time as a player it's a game that's created by a man. Showing these angles and stuff like that. And so, it is sexualizing her in a way but within the story it's like she is consenting but then as a player it's like she's not consenting.” (Interviewee No. 5)

As discussed in the Theoretical Framework section of this paper, sexual objectification of women occurs when women get treated solely as “sex objects” (Cabras et al., 2018; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Moreover, as explained by Gervais and Eagan (2017), objectification of women in media takes place when particularly sexualized body parts like the chest, buttocks, thighs, and lips—are given more attention than their faces. The

participants of this study argued that Bayonetta's physical features are not sexualised or exaggerated, since her body parts are realistically depicted. Furthermore, the analysis found that the participants did not view sexualisation part of the character as central to the "Bayonetta" game series, but rather as complimentary to her confidence in her sexuality. Therefore, according to this study, Bayonetta cannot be labeled as a sexually objectified character.

In addition, the camera positioning in the game is also central to this paper. The researcher asked the participants to share their opinions on the "camera angles" in the game, that are deemed as extremely sexualised by various studies. Such sexualization is usually illustrated during the combat scenes, where the main character is depicted almost naked when the "special attacks" are about to get used or in provocative angles, such as "crotch shots". The examples of such camera placements are presented below:



However, the game tone, implying the atmosphere that surrounds the game, of "Bayonetta" was brought up frequently by the participants. It was argued that sexualized parts of the game play were not meant to be taken seriously; on the contrary, they were specifically designed by the creators as a sort of the comic relief and should be viewed through the lens of drag performance.

"When the summoning of course, when she's almost naked, she's always doing poses for-, And that always reminds me of-, I don't know if you're watching Ru Paul's Drag Race or some Drag Shows. Yeah, it always reminds me of Drag Queens who are competing in a dance battle or something like that, or they're doing a lip sync so they have to show something off. Show a cool pose, or maybe tear their clothes off. It reminds me a little bit of that." (Interviewee No. 7)

"I'll be honest with you. I didn't mind it. It made me laugh. It made me giggle. I think that's also because of the tone that the game takes on. It's not a serious game. It's lots of jokes" (Interviewee No. 8)

“I don't think it's as bad as people think, people like Anita Sarkeesian for example. I don't think it's as bad as they say. I think that she's sexualized but more like she's making fun of media that's really sexualized. I don't think that she's problematic. I think that she's just making fun of the media that's problematic. Or it seems like a parody.” (Interviewee No. 5)

Throughout the interview some of the participants referred to Bayonetta as the embodiment of a queer character, due to the way she fights which correlates with how drag queens perform. The findings support the arguments proposed by Harper (2014) and Philips (2020) that Bayonetta is a character that mocks and humiliates the male gaze, and subsequently, “shuts down” the objectification gaze. Essentially, just the design of the character was not labelled as sexual by the respondents, and most of them outlined that she is a sexually open character that carries herself with confidence and power. For this reason, none of the respondents felt that the lead was sexualized for the purpose of the male gaze, contradictorily, in order to portray a powerful female character who is comfortable in her sexuality.

#### *4.2. Feminist Character*

The game design and character design of “Bayonetta” sparked a lot of debate and controversy within the academia, due to explicit sexualisation of the main character as well as camera positioning. However, the findings of this analysis show that the participants regarded Bayonetta as an embodiment of a feminist character. Before the idea of a feminist character was introduced to the participants, the researcher asked them to provide their definitions of the term “feminism”. Most of the participants, described feminism as equality of sexes, in terms of opportunity, or as having a freedom of choice.

“Feminism is the equality of all sexes, making the playing grounds equal for men and for women, which means things like dropping toxic masculinity like, "Oh, boys will be boys." Getting that, cutting that out, talking the same things as, "Oh, if he's beating up on you, that means he likes you. If he's pulling your hair, that means he likes you." Cutting that out, not having stereotypical gender roles in the house, like everybody can learn how to do laundry, everybody can learn how to cook dinner. So, I think feminism, what it should be is, again, the equality of all sexes. I understand that some people take it a little bit too far. Extremism can happen anytime, anywhere but it should be the equality of everything for all sexes.” (Interviewee No.8)

“I think feminism, for me, is being exactly how you want to be. And without being like, "Of course, I can wear a dress, but I don't have to wear a dress if I don't want to. I can put on my makeup. But I don't have to if I don't want to". I think people see women who have to dress nicely for men, and they have to put on makeup

for them. And I'm like, "No, I'm wearing makeup for myself. I'm wearing nice clothes only for myself.". I really love that." (Interviewee No. 7)

Afterwards, the participants were asked to describe the attributes of a feminist character. According to the participants, there are several features that make up a good feminist character, that are present in "Bayonetta". Firstly, the game abolishes the "damsel in distress" trope that is often used to portray female characters in media. Such trope depicts female heroines as those needed to be constantly saved by the fellow male character. According to Jobin & Bonenfant (2017), in games, damsels can also act as the player's inspiration, a hidden treasure to be found, or a reward for winning the game. The fundamental problem of "damsel in distress" trope is that associated with the patriarchal male-dominated system because they uphold an antiquated view of women as spoils of war that deprives females of their own bodies (Jobin & Bonenfant, 2017). The researcher asked the participants to think of different female character tropes, or archetypes, that are commonly in media. When the participants reflected on the character trope of "damsel in distress", the researcher asked them to parallel that trope to the "Bayonetta" game series. The participants agreed that "Bayonetta" goes beyond the outdated "damsel in distress" trope and shows a powerful female character that is fully independent and is able to fight off any obstacle on her way. The term "independent" was implemented constantly by the respondents when asked about their envision of a feminist character. Such independence is outlined in the form of a female lead being to withstand any hardships on her own, without assistance from another character, especially a male character. Participants added that they are tired of the overused "damsel in distress" cliché. As "Bayonetta" offers a powerful representation of a female lead since she is always portrayed as the one being in control in fighting, her sexuality or her relationship with secondary characters throughout the game, "Bayonetta" is particularly appealing to the participants. Thus, as Haslam (2019) suggested that Lara Croft broke the stereotypical representation women in media through the "damsel in distress" trope, the same conclusion can be applied to the "Bayonetta" series, since the character was deemed as the driving force of the game plot by the participants.

"I'm like, "Okay, damsel in distress is cool and all, but that's all played out." I mean, I would like to see a character that can save herself even when she's put into situations like, "Whoa. How is she going to get out of that?" Here she is coming through and kicking the bad guy's ass again. I'm not saying that doesn't exist in other female characters, but honestly, Bayonetta was one of the first times that I saw that in a female lead. I was like, "That's it. That's it right there. That's what I'm looking for." (Interviewee No. 3)

Several studies explored earlier mention that Bayonetta falls under the “femme fatale” character trope, since she uses flirting as a tool to obtain valuable information from a male character and as such, she embodies a hostile sexist character trait (Tompkins et al., 2020; Fischer, 2018). When asked about whether Bayonetta can be categorised as a “femme fatale” character, the participants disagreed with that statement. The rationale behind this was that the participants did not view Bayonetta as being manipulative or hostile towards other characters. Participants agreed that Bayonetta is flirtatious, which is a component of a “femme fatale” trope but stated that she does not use her sexuality as an advantage over others.

“A lot of times when I think of femme fatale I think of old detective movies where the femme fatale is manipulating the male character. I don’t know if that really describes Bayonetta” (Interviewee No. 5)

The representation of Bayonetta as a powerful action heroine that always wins on her own terms and is in control of her sexuality, ultimately, attracted all the participants. However, throughout the game Bayonetta also showed her vulnerable side, making the interviewees perceive such vulnerability not as a weakness, but rather as a relatable character. In addition, a feminist female lead must also be a three-dimensional character whose story does not revolve around seeking male approval. Yet, most respondents also pointed out that the feminist agenda is not a necessary component of a feminist heroine.

“I don't think that you need to have a specifically feminist agenda because the act of simply having, uh, well written women is almost a liberatory, uh, act in and of itself because you know, how much literature or not just literature, but fiction and art, uh, are male dominated spaces.” (Interviewee No.1)

“The first thing that comes to my mind is, of course, Bayonetta. I think she is a great example of a feminist character. Because she’s doing everything that she wants, and she doesn’t need anyone’s approval. She’s how she wants to be.” (Interviewee No. 7)

The participants were also asked to provide a differentiative qualities of Bayonetta that makes her stand out among other female leads. Participants stated that in contrast to many video games with female leads, Bayonetta’s character sends a message that female heroines do not have to be physically sexually explicit in order to come across as powerful and badass.



Essentially, the participants categorised Bayonetta as a feminist character, as she constantly proves that she is a strong and an independent woman.

#### *4.3. Empowerment*

The term “empowerment” is a central component within the scope of this research. As seen by the discussion done in the Theoretical Framework part of the study, the correlation between empowerment in women and the sexualisation of female characters in media is still disputed. The term “empowerment” was conceptualised by the participants as acquiring confidence and power to overcome personal issues. The data analysis of this research found out that female gamers might get empowered. Yet, the participants listed a number of features in Bayonetta that made them feel empowered, implying that there are several criteria that must be present in a female character to make women feel empowered. The first criteria pointed by some participants is the physical capabilities of Bayonetta. The Interviewee No. 1, particularly described Bayonetta as “a queer woman in a patriarchal society that doesn't take shit from anyone regardless.”. The fact that she was depicted as a very powerful woman capable of defeating her enemies by herself and having a complete control over herself, made some participants feel empowered.

“Her taking control of certain situations and actually knowing what she's worth and that she's powerful is really empowering!” (Interviewee No.2)

Moreover, some interviewees claimed that it was very empowering for them to play as female lead that can guard and show her boundaries.

“I think it's in all these little moments. I've got this scene in mind, it's maybe not the best example, but I believe she's getting attacked by one of those angels, that she's doing her little dance and that angel wants to touch her and she's like, "hell no, dude, don't touch me." And I'm like, "hell yeah girl. Don't touch her." Those little things, but she also can be very flirtatious but that's because she wants to, and that's empowering as well because women are allowed to be flirtatious as well. So, it's all the little things throughout the whole game that makes her empowering to me.” (Interviewee No.4)

The term “confidence” was used extensively by the interviewees to describe Bayonetta’s traits of being confident in beliefs as well as her sexuality. Bayonetta’s character radiates confidence in terms of not being afraid of being sexually open, which left many interviewees feel confident, in terms of their sexuality as well. The fact that she was not

intimated of being herself and confident in her beliefs, got interviewees inspired and motivated to overcome their insecurities.

“I guess it was just that there was no hesitation. No fear of being herself and being openly sexual. You didn't feel her, like, "Oh, well be timid," and, like, "Oh, maybe I shouldn't do that." Even as a nun, just dressed as a nun, she exuded that confidence, that sexuality. I think that was empowering for me because, well, I still very much have things I need to work on with my confidence. I was timider. I was more fearful about being myself. I was lacking the confidence, not necessarily to be open sexually, but just to be myself for the world. There have been situations that I've been put into with friends and family and such because I was too afraid to be myself. So, I was like people pleasing, saying yes to things I shouldn't have, things like that. Again, I'm not trying to say Bayonetta changed my life or anything, but having that strong female lead character, who wasn't afraid to be who she was, again, sexually open. That's what she is. That's Bayonetta's character. She's not timid. She's not afraid to show off. That helps.” (Interviewee No. 8)

“Why she was made this way, and why she has the personality that she has. Because, I think for some people, it could be very inspiring. Like I said before, this series is one big confidence boost to me, empowering me by being who I really am. It could be inspiring. It could inspire some people to be themselves, which sometimes is really hard.” (Interviewee No. 7)

Essentially, all the interviewees stated that playing the “Bayonetta” game series had a positive effect on them. This effect can be linked to the Social Learning Theory that was explored above. As described by Luong and Knobloch-Westerwick, (2017) women can learn new behaviours by observing others in the media. The findings of this research suggests that some participants felt more confident after being exposed to Bayonetta, since the character is always confident in all her endeavours. Others argued that she accelerated their personal growth and, even, assisted in understanding their sexuality. Despite the debate of Bayonetta being as a sexualized character for the appeal of the male gaze, ultimately, women who played the game felt empowered by the character.

## 5. Conclusion

This section is going to summarize the findings of this study and its significance. In addition, limitations and further research will also be uncovered in this chapter.

As a result of this study, it was evident that the term “sexualisation” is still contested to this day, since researchers cannot find consensus on the components of sexualisation. Some scholars argued that sexualisation stems from sexual objectification (Liss et al., 2011; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Bennet et al., 2018; Fritz & Paul, 2017), while others claim that sexual objectification is just one of the factors of sexualisation (APA, 2007; Ward, 2016). The data analysis of this study suggested that female gamers interpret sexualisation merely as the exaggeration of body parts or inappropriate nudity. The gender stereotyping is still present in video games, which can be very problematic since they may encourage sexual objectification. However, according to Kondrat (2015) there are an increasing number of games that aim to have female protagonists, that do not follow stereotypical character tropes, and even feature male characters. One of such games that detached itself from being stereotypical, in terms of its characters, is “Bayonetta” game series. The participants of this study claimed that beyond the outdated “damsel in distress” trope, since she is depicted as powerful and independent. In fact, such features of Bayonetta as being powerful and independent were also categorised as feminist characteristics. Moreover, participants of this research claimed that playing as Bayonetta made them feel empowered and, as a result, boost their confidence.

The main of this study was to understand how female gamers make sense of their gaming experience through a qualitative study of the “Bayonetta” game series. This research is based on literature throughout various academic fields: sociology, psychology, game studies and media studies. The theoretical framework conducted on the literature of these fields, aided the researcher with the development of the Interview Guide. As a result, it became feasible to answer the main research question of this study: “How do female gamers experiences playing the game series “Bayonetta”?”. The study used a qualitative approach to address the research question. In-depth interviews were used as method of data collection. Ten women of different ages, nationalities and occupations were interviewed, using the semi-structured interview type. Ultimately, thematic analysis was chosen as a method of data analysis, which produced three main themes. The first theme is “Beyond the male gaze” and it involves the sub-themes: *purposeful sexualisation, respectful design and game tone*. The second theme is “Feminist character” and includes the sub-themes: *sexual liberation, independency and equality*. The

final theme is “Empowerment” with respective sub-themes: *confidence, flaunted sexuality and power*.

The results from thematic analysis were used to answer the research question and its sub-questions: “How do female gamers define sexualisation?”, “How do female gamers envision a feminist character?”, and “How do female gamers experience the camera placements of Bayonetta’s game design?”. The research found that female gamers does not consider the character of Bayonetta as sexualised and, in fact, feel that the depiction of the character as “sexy” is organic to her personality. Moreover, female gamers stated that Bayonetta should be viewed through the lens of drag performance, which changes the rhetoric around her sexualisation. Furthermore, Bayonetta was labelled by the female gamers as a representation of a feminist character. Finally, female gamers experienced a positive effect as a result of playing the “Bayonetta” game series, as it made them feel empowered, consequently, increased their confidence.

### *5.1. Theoretical Implications*

While other studies within the field of game studies lacked research on sexualisation and female gamers experience, this study is conducted by interviewing ten female gamers, thus, it offers a unique perspective into how female gamers experience and view sexualisation of female characters.

The participants of this study agreed with Gervais and Eagan, (2017) that sexualisation occurs when women’s bodies in media —particularly sexualized body parts like the chest, buttocks, thighs, and lips—are given more attention than their faces. Participants disagreed that Bayonetta’s design is sexualised, since her body parts are not exaggerated. The finding is opposing the claims made by researchers like Anita Sarkeesian, who argued that Bayonetta as a protagonist was created to appeal to and satisfy the male gaze. The participants specifically argued that the character of Bayonetta falls beyond the outdated notion of “male gaze”. Another issue that was uncovered in the game is camera angles. The camera usage in Bayonetta is greatly ignored. However, the camera angle has been sexualized differently from most of the films where the female character is defeated. In Bayonetta, the camera focuses and zooms on the breasts of the main character. According to Nitz et al., (2007), camera angles tend to be sexualized since they film the female body features to accentuate them for arousal. However, the findings oppose the previous statement, as participants argued that camera

angles in the game are designed to be a comic relief to the game and should be viewed through the lens of drag performance. In fact, the studies conducted by (Philips, 2020; Harper, 2015; Ruberg, 2019) suggest that Bayonetta is, ultimately, a queer character that uses her sexuality to criticise the representation of women in a patriarchal world. The findings of this paper align with the statements of the previous studies.

Some researchers (Frischer, 2018; Tompkins et al., 2020) argued that Bayonetta is a sexist character, since she uses flirting as a tool to obtain valuable information from a male character, she is manipulative and represents the femme fatale character trope. Yet, the findings of this study suggest that Bayonetta is not a sexist character, as the participants did not view Bayonetta as being manipulative or hostile towards other characters. Participants agreed that Bayonetta is flirtatious, which is a component of a “femme fatale” trope but stated that she does not use her sexuality as an advantage over others.

As argued by Hollet, (2019), objectification of women in media occurs during the enhancement of sexual attributes (such as breasts and buttocks) and wearing provocative clothing. Participants of this study argued that Bayonetta is not objectified because she her body parts are not exaggerated, she is depicted realistically, and the sexy parts of the game is relevant to her character. Moreover, participants also argued that she is designed respectfully because she is not looked down upon in the game. For this reason, the results of this paper concluded that Bayonetta is neither a sexualised nor an objectified character.

The relationship between sexualization and empowerment is complex and contested. While some studies have found that sexualization can empower women (Gill, 2012; Erchull & Liss, 2013), others have found that it can have adverse effects (Pennell & Behm-Morawitz, 2015; Erchull & Liss, 2013; Perloff, 2014, Lööf, 2015). This suggests that the impact of sexualization on women depends on factors, including the context in which it is encountered and the individual woman's interpretation of it. The findings of this study suggest that women who played the “Bayonetta” series felt empowered by the main character. The participants argued that Bayonetta increased their confidence, accelerated their personal growth and assisted in understanding their sexuality. Overall, the findings of this paper suggest that the “Bayonetta” game series had a positive impact on women playing the game.

## 5.2. *Social Implications*

The representation of women in games has been a crucial topic within the game studies. The design of female characters in games was always more sexualised in comparison to male characters. Miller and Summers (2007) suggest that male characters were significantly more likely to be shown as strong and athletic, while female characters were substantially more likely to be portrayed as seductive and wearing revealing clothing. Moreover, studies by (Starr & Ferguson, 2012; Miller & Summers, 2007) claimed that female main leads were quite rare within the game industry, in comparison to male main characters. Even if female characters were represented, the media's portrayal of strong, independent women is always overpowered by their attractive features, which encourages male gaze and sexualization (Smith & Decker, 2016). However, the study conducted by Kondrat (2015), stated that there are an increasing number of games that aim to have female protagonists and evenly featured male characters. Consequently, it appears that the situation in which women are predominantly only negatively characterized (as mistress, damsel in distress, and sexual objects) is gradually improving (Kondrat, 2015).

The findings of this study align with the statements of Kondrat (2015), and suggest that the video game industry is, in fact, getting better as more leading female characters are represented. The case of “Bayonetta” showed that the female character can be represented as strong and independent, and, at the same time, have a full control of her sexuality. The participants of these studies suggested that Bayonetta is, in fact, a depiction of a feminist character in games, as she constantly proves that she is a strong and an independent woman. Furthermore, the participants claimed that it is implied by the character of Bayonetta that female protagonists can be strong and fierce without being overtly sexual.

The findings of this study suggest that characters, such as Bayoentta, can be helpful at impacting the video games community to include more female leads that are portrayed as strong, independent and not secondary to male characters.

### *5.3. Limitations and Future research*

The limitations of this study included the inability of the researcher to gather a more culturally diverse sample. The sample of this research included solely women from the European countries or the United States. For this reason, a more culturally diverse sample is recommended in future research. Moreover, the method of interviews, despite being deemed as reliable, in terms of analysing the experiences of people (Showkat & Parveen, 2017; Milena et al., 2008; Gill et al., 2008), the results produced out of interviews cannot be generalised to a larger group of people. Another important limitation of this study is the fact that this paper could not analyse the third part of the “Bayonetta” game series, since the last part came out after the interviews were conducted.

As this study suggests, the concept of sexualisation is yet to be fully explored. For this reason, the possibility of future research may include the deeper analysis of the characteristics of a sexualised female character as well as the cases when sexualisation of female characters can be deemed as appropriate.

Furthermore, along with the psychosocial implications of in-game aggressiveness and the oversexualization of female players on their psychological health, well-being, and general gameplay viewpoint, it is crucial to advance research that examines the motivations of female players.

In addition, because there is a gap in the academic literature regarding the experiences of female gamers with male-oriented games, it is unclear what it means to be a female gamer and how this group of players interacts with video games. The experiences of female gamers who play games that are regarded as being male-oriented is recommended to be studied further by the academic community.

## References:

- Anupama, K., & Chithra, G. K. (2022). Of Castration Anxiety and Hypersexualized Female Bodies: A Critical Assessment of the Objectifying Gaze in Batman: Arkham Video Game Series. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 12(9), 1921-1929. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1209.26>
- Aubrey, J. S., Gamble, H., & Hahn, R. (2017). Empowered sexual objects? The priming influence of self-sexualisation on thoughts and beliefs related to gender, sex, and power. *Western Journal of Communication*, 81(3), 362-384. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570314.2016.1257822>
- Ballard, M. E., & Welch, K. M. (2017). Virtual warfare: Cyberbullying and cyber-victimization in MMOG play. *Games and culture*, 12(5), 466-491. <https://doi.org/10.1177/155541201559247>
- Behm-Morawitz, E., & Mastro, D. (2009). The effects of the sexualisation of female video game characters on gender stereotyping and female self-concept. *Sex roles*, 61(11), 808-823. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-009-9683-8>
- Biefeld, S. D., Stone, E. A., & Brown, C. S. (2021). Sexy, thin, and white: The intersection of sexualisation, body type, and race on stereotypes about women. *Sex Roles*, 85(5), 287-300. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-020-01221-2>
- Bristot, P. C., Pozzebon, E., Frigo, L. B., Canal, F. Z., & da Rosa Carraro, J. A. (2019). Female Representation in Video Games. *Clei Electronic Journal*, 22(2). [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Eliane-Pozzebon/publication/342945119\\_Female\\_Representation\\_in\\_Video\\_Games/links/5f0e7691299bf1e548b6f059/Female-Representation-in-Video-Games.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Eliane-Pozzebon/publication/342945119_Female_Representation_in_Video_Games/links/5f0e7691299bf1e548b6f059/Female-Representation-in-Video-Games.pdf)
- Cote, A. C. (2017). “I can defend myself” women’s strategies for coping with harassment while gaming online. *Games and Culture*, 12(2), 136-155. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412015587603>
- Davies, E. (2016). Bayonetta: A Journey through Time and Space. *M/C Journal*, 19(5). <https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.1147>
- Erchull, M. J., & Liss, M. (2013). Feminists who flaunt it: Exploring the enjoyment of sexualisation among young feminist women. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 43(12), 2341-2349. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jasp.12183>



- Fasoli, F., Durante, F., Mari, S., Zogmaister, C., & Volpato, C. (2018). Shades of sexualization: When sexualization becomes sexual objectification. *Sex Roles*, 78(5), 338-351. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-017-0808-1>
- Finzsch, N. (2008). Male gaze and racism. In *Gender Forum* (Vol. 23, pp. 23-40). [http://genderforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/200823\\_Complete.pdf#page=26](http://genderforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/200823_Complete.pdf#page=26)
- Fischer, M. (2018). *Video game use, ambivalent sexism, and rape myth acceptance: an experimental analysis*. [Master's thesis, The California State University]. ScholarWorks. <http://hdl.handle.net/10211.3/206247>
- Fox, J., Bailenson, J. N., & Tricase, L. (2013). The embodiment of sexualized virtual selves: The Proteus effect and experiences of self-objectification via avatars. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 29(3), 930-938. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-017-0808-1>
- Fox, J., & Tang, W. Y. (2017). Women's experiences with general and sexual harassment in online video games: rumination, organizational responsiveness, withdrawal, and coping strategies. *New Media & Society*, 19(8), 1290-1307. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816635778>
- Gill, R. (2012). Media, empowerment and the 'sexualisation of culture debates. *Sex roles*, 66(11), 736-745. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-011-0107-1>
- Hemmann, K. (2020). *Manga Cultures and the Female Gaze*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-18095-9\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-18095-9_3)
- Hollett, R. C., Morgan, H., Chen, N., & Gignac, G. E. (2020). Female characters from adult-only video games elicit a sexually objectifying gaze in both men and women. *Sex Roles*, 83(1), 29-42. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-019-01096-y>
- Jose, A. (2017). Male and Female Gaze in Bollywood Films. *Literary Herald*, 3(4), 53-59. <http://tlhjournal.com/uploads/products/8.ashima-article.pdf>
- Kaye, L. K., & Pennington, C. R. (2016). "Girls can't play": the effects of stereotype threat on females' gaming performance. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 59, 202-209. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.02.020>

- Lanier, Liz (2019, August 28), 'Is the Games Industry Getting its #MeToo Movement?', Forbes Magazine, 28 August 2019. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/lizlanier/2019/08/28/is-the-games-industry-getting-its-metoo-movement/#f0c925e52024>
- Lööf, J. (2015). *An inquisitive gaze: Exploring the male gaze and the portrayal of gender in Dragon Age: Inquisition*. [Bachelor thesis, Stockholm University]. <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A818235&dswid=6695>
- Luong, K. T., & Knobloch-Westerwick, S. (2017). Can the media help women be better at math? Stereotype threat, selective exposure, media effects, and women's math performance. *Human Communication Research*, 43(2), 193-213. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hcre.12101>
- Lynch, T., Tompkins, J. E., Van Driel, I. I., & Fritz, N. (2016). Sexy, strong, and secondary: A content analysis of female characters in video games across 31 years. *Journal of Communication*, 66(4), 564-584. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12237>
- Mulvey, L. (2013). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. In *Feminism and film theory* (pp. 57-68). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203699362>
- Nitz, M., Reichert, T., Aune, A. S., & Velde, A. V. (2007). All the news that's fit to see? The sexualization of television news journalists as a promotional strategy. *Journal of Promotion Management*, 13(1-2), 13-33. [https://doi.org/10.1300/J057v13n01\\_03](https://doi.org/10.1300/J057v13n01_03)
- Oliver, K. (2017). The male gaze is more relevant, and more dangerous, than ever. *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 15(4), 451-455. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17400309.2017.1377937>
- Pennell, H., & Behm-Morawitz, E. (2015). The empowering (super) heroine? The effects of sexualised female characters in superhero films on women. *Sex Roles*, 72(5), 211-220. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-015-0455-3>
- Perloff, R. M. (2014). Social media effects on young women's body image concern: Theoretical perspectives and an agenda for research. *Sex roles*, 71(11), 363-377. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-014-0384-6>
- Perreault, M. F., Perreault, G. P., Jenkins, J., & Morrison, A. (2018). Depictions of female protagonists in digital games: A narrative analysis of 2013 dice award-winning digital games. *Games and Culture*, 13(8), 843-860. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412016679584>
- Phillips, A. (2020). *Gamer trouble: Feminist confrontations in digital culture*. NYU Press.

- Pidgeon, A., & Harker, R. A. (2013). Body-focused anxiety in women: Associations with the internalisation of the thin-ideal, dieting frequency, body mass index and media effects. *Open Journal of Medical Psychology*, 2(04), 17. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojmp.2013.24B004>
- Ponterotto, D. (2016). Resisting the male gaze: feminist responses to Western culture's "normalization" of the female body. *Journal of international women's studies*, 17(1), 133-151. Retrieved from: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol17/iss1/10>
- Sampson, R. (2017, October 27). *Film theory 101—Laura Mulvey: The male gaze theory*. <https://www.filminquiry.com/film-theory-basics-laura-mulvey-male-gaze-theory/#:~:text=The%20Male%20Gaze%20theory%2C%20in,passive%20objects%20of%20male%20desire>
- Sarkeesian, A., & Cross, K. (2015). Your humanity is in another castle: Terror dreams and the harassment of women. *The state of play: Creators and critics on video game culture*, 103-126.
- Skowronski, M., Busching, R., & Krahé, B. (2021). The effects of sexualized video game characters and character personalization on women's self-objectification and body satisfaction. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 92, Article 104051. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2020.104051>
- Smith, R., & Decker, A. (2016, August). Understanding the impact of QPOC representation in video games. In *2016 Research on Equity and Sustained Participation in Engineering, Computing, and Technology (RESPECT)* (pp. 1-8). IEEE. <https://doi.org/10.1109/RESPECT.2016.7836164>
- Starr, C. R., & Ferguson, G. M. (2012). Sexy dolls, sexy grade-schoolers? Media & maternal influences on young girls' self-sexualization. *Sex roles*, 67(7), 463-476. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-012-0183-x>
- Terry, G., Hayfield, N., Clarke, V., Braun, V. (2017). Thematic analysis. In C. Willig, W. Stainton-Rogers (Ed.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research in psychology* (pp. 17-37). SAGE.
- Tomlinson, C. (2019). Building a Gamer: Player Preferences and Motivations Across Gender and Genre. In *DiGRA Conference*. [http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/DiGRA\\_2019\\_paper\\_242.pdf](http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/DiGRA_2019_paper_242.pdf)
- Tompkins, J. E., Lynch, T., Van Driel, I. I., & Fritz, N. (2020). Kawaii killers and femme Fatales: A textual analysis of female characters signifying benevolent and hostile sexism in video games. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 64(2), 236-254.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2020.1718960>

Vermeulen, L., Van Bauwel, S., & Van Looy, J. (2017). Tracing female gamer identity. An empirical study into gender and stereotype threat perceptions. *Computers in Human Behavior, 71*, 90–98. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2017.01.054>

Ward, L. M. (2016). Media and sexualization: State of empirical research, 1995–2015. *The Journal of Sex Research, 53*(4-5), 560-577. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2016.1142496>

Young, G., & Whitty, M. (2017). *Transcending taboos: A moral and psychological examination of cyberspace*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203126769>

## **Appendix A**

### *Interview Guide*

1. Introduction
  - 1.1. Explanation of consent form.
  - 1.2. Explanation of research.
  - 1.3. Questions to build rapport.
    - 1.3.1. Would you consider yourself a gamer?
    - 1.3.2. What games do you usually play?
    - 1.3.3. Can you tell me your top 3 games of all time?
  - 1.4. How did you come across Bayonetta?
  - 1.5. Have you played both parts of the franchise?
  - 1.6. Have you seen the new trailer for the upcoming Bayonetta 3?
2. Experience with the gameplay.
  - 2.1. How would you describe the character of Bayonetta?
  - 2.2. What is her relationship with secondary characters and how is it portrayed?
    - 2.2.1. How would you describe her relationship with male characters?
  - 2.3. Do you like the design of Bayonetta and the secondary characters?
  - 2.4. How would you describe the design of the game?
  - 2.5. Are there any differentiating qualities of the game that make it stand out among other games with a female lead?
3. Perception of the sexualized character
  - 3.1. Is the design of Bayonetta sexualized, in your opinion?
  - 3.2. Numerous critics argue that Bayonetta is hypersexualized or oversexualized, what is your stance on this matter?
  - 3.3. In your opinion, is the sexualization of female characters targeted specifically to please the male audience?
  - 3.4. Do you think that sexualization of female characters in media yields negative or positive outcomes for women?
  - 3.5. Has the character of Bayonetta impacted you and your self-perception?
  - 3.6. Are there any emotions or feelings that were evoked because of long-term exposure to a sexualized female character?
4. Sex and empowerment
  - 4.1. How would you define “power”?
  - 4.2. How would you describe a powerful female character?
    - 4.2.1. What makes a character empowering for you?

- 4.2.2. Would you consider sexualization as a form of empowerment?
- 4.2.3. Do you think the character of Bayonetta is empowering?
  - 4.2.3.1. At what points in the game did you feel empowered?
  - 4.2.3.2. What are the traits of Bayonetta's character that make her empowering for females playing the game?
- 4.3. Do you think that sexualized female leads affect female gamers in a positive way?
  - 4.3.1. Should female gamers be more exposed to character design, such as Bayonetta's?
- 4.4. Do you think that female characters, such as Bayonetta who own up to their sexuality, in such a way liberate themselves from gendered norms?
  - 4.4.1. Does it have any effect on women in relation to patriarchal constraints?
- 5. Feminism, sexism and Bayonetta.
  - 5.1. How would you define "feminism"?
  - 5.2. How would you describe a feminist character in media?
    - 5.2.1. Do you think that sexual liberation is an important factor in a feminist character?
  - 5.3. Do you think that sexualization of Bayonetta is misogynistic?
  - 5.4. What would you call the character trope of Bayonetta?
    - 5.4.1. Do you think that these "badass" "female fatale tropes" are inherently sexist?
  - 5.5. How do you envision a feminist game design?
    - 5.5.1. Do you think that Bayonetta falls under that category?
- 6. Video game industry and female games.
  - 6.1. Do you think that the video game industry is misogynistic?
  - 6.2. Does inclusion of more sexualized "badass" female leads help battle such misogyny?
  - 6.3. Do characters, such as Bayonetta help to break from such misogyny or only reinforce it?
  - 6.4. Do you think more characters like Bayonetta should be introduced to the video games market?
    - 6.4.1. How would female gamers benefit from that?
- 7. Conclusion
  - 7.1. In what way, do you think, playing as a powerful yet sexualized female lead affected you?
  - 7.2. Do women have to be sexually open to feel empowered?
  - 7.3. How does the game design of Bayonetta make you feel?
  - 7.4. Do you think the character of Bayonetta is empowering to females who play the game?
  - 7.5. Do you think that the game design of Bayonetta benefits the self-perception of female gamers?
  - 7.6. Would you change something in Bayonetta's design or the game design, if you could?
  - 7.7. Would you recommend playing Bayonetta to other women?

## Appendix B

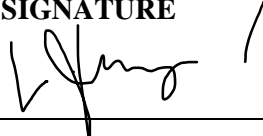
### Consent form

#### INFORMED CONSENT FORM

<b>Project Title and version</b>	"Male gaze, empowerment and female gamers: The case of Bayonetta."
<b>Name of Principal Investigator</b>	Leyla Ahmadzada
<b>Name of Organisation</b>	Erasmus University Rotterdam
<b>Name of Sponsor</b>	
<b>Purpose of the Study</b>	This research is being conducted Leyla Ahmadzada. I am inviting you to participate in this research project about the experiences of female games. The purpose of this research project is to unravel the experiences of female gamers playing "Bayonetta".
<b>Procedures</b>	You will participate in an interview lasting approximately 45 minutes. You will be asked questions about your experience of the game play.  You must be at least 18 years old!
<b>Potential and anticipated Risks and Discomforts</b>	There are no obvious physical, legal or economic risks associated with participating in this study. You do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. Your participation is voluntary, and you are free to discontinue your participation at any time.
<b>Potential Benefits</b>	Participation in this study does not guarantee any beneficial results to you. As a result of participating, you may better understand how you comprehend the way female characters are represented and in what way it influences you.
<b>Sharing the results</b>	Your plan for sharing the findings with the participants should be provided. If you have a plan and a timeline for the sharing of information, include the details. You may also inform the participant that the research findings will be shared more broadly, for example, through publications and conferences.

<p><b>Confidentiality</b></p>	<p>Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law. No personally identifiable information will be reported in any research product. Moreover, only trained research staff will have access to your responses. Within these restrictions, results of this study will be made available to you upon request.</p> <p>As indicated above, this research project involves making audio recordings of interviews with you. Transcribed segments from the audio recordings may be used in published forms (e.g., journal articles and book chapters). In the case of publication, pseudonyms will be used. The audio recordings, forms, and other documents created or collected as part of this study will be stored in a secure location in the researchers' offices or on the researcher's password-protected computers and will be destroyed within ten years of the initiation of the study.</p>
<p><b>Compensation</b></p>	<p><i>10 Euros</i></p>
<p><b>Right to Withdraw and Questions</b></p>	<p>Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalised or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.</p> <p>If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the primary investigator:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Email: 6141511a@eur.nl or leylishere@gmail.com</p>
<p><b>Statement of Consent</b></p>	<p>Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree that you will participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form.</p> <p>I have been given the guarantee that this research project has been reviewed and approved by the ESHCC Ethics Review Committee. For research problems or any other question regarding the research project, the Data Protection Officer of Erasmus University, Marlon Domingus, MA (<a href="mailto:fg@eur.nl">fg@eur.nl</a>)</p> <p>If you agree to participate, please sign your name below.</p>
<p><b>Audio recording</b> (if applicable)</p>	<p>I consent to have my interview audio recorded</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> yes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> no</p>



<b>Secondary use</b> (if applicable)	I consent to have the anonymised data be used for secondary analysis  <input type="checkbox"/> yes  <input type="checkbox"/> no	
<b>Signature and Date</b>	<b>NAME PARTICIPANT</b>	<b>NAME PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR</b> Leyla Ahmadzada
	<b>SIGNATURE</b>	<b>SIGNATURE</b> 
	<b>DATE</b>	<b>DATE</b> 12.09.2022

## Appendix C

### Codebook

Main Themes	Subthemes	Codes
Beyond the male gaze	Purposeful sexualisation	Personality
		Game narrative
		Normalisation of sexuality
		Liberation from gender norms
	Respectful design	Humble
		Respectful
		Kind
		Nurturing
		Caring
		Classy
		Sassy
		No exaggerated body features
		No objectification
		Sexy yet consensual
		Organic
	Game tone	Comic relief
		Not to be taken seriously
		Irony
		Drag
		Performance
Exaggeration		
Feminist character	Sexual liberation	Owns up to her sexuality
		In control of her sexuality
		Personal boundaries

	Independency	Everything is under control
		Does not need to be saved
		Beyond damsel in distress
	Equality	Sees everyone as equal
		Does not look down on secondary characters
Empowerment	Confidence	Sexually open
		Confident in her powers
		Confident in her beliefs
	Flaunted sexuality	Sexuality as a tool
		Body confidence
		Appealing attitude
	Power	Strong
		Powerful
		In control