

“Oh F*, it’s a Girl”**

Exploring the Challenges Faced by Women in Online Gaming Lobbies

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ABSTRACT

Since the 2014 Gamergate controversy and even prior, women have encountered significant challenges within the realm of online gaming, a topic that has extensively been examined in academia, especially at the height of the controversy. Now, almost 10 years later, women within the gaming industry and women engaging with games still face persistent challenges. While online gaming can positively impact mental health and well-being, female gamers not only encounter general toxicity, but also harassment specifically based on their gender. Despite numerous studies highlighting increased diversity within gaming communities, with gender representation levels nearly equal, women continue to experience heightened levels of online harassment. Therefore, this research aims to explore the challenges women face when confronted with toxicity in online gaming lobbies. Specifically, the research question this thesis focuses on is the following: *How do female gamers experience gender-based toxicity within online gaming lobbies?*

This research employed a total of two qualitative data collection methods. First, an autoethnography, where I captured my firsthand experiences with toxicity by participating in online gaming lobbies. I played a total of ten rounds in Fortnite’s Battle Royale mode and encountered various forms of toxicity, including trash-talking, racial slurs and sexist remarks. Second, a total of 11 in-depth interviews were conducted with active female gamers. The interviewees played diverse games in various genres, ranging from MMORPGs to online battle arenas and tactical shooters. The interviews focused on their past experiences with toxicity, how toxicity impacted them on a personal level and on their general gameplay, and the strategies they employed in response to toxicity. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis and revealed a total of four distinct themes. The first theme highlighted the diverse forms of toxicity faced by female gamers. The second theme explored their reactions to toxicity, including emotional, physical and behavioral reactions. Next, various response strategies were outlined when encountering toxicity. At last, the final theme focused on the positive experiences female gamers had while playing online with others.

This research highlighted the ongoing hostility that female gamers encounter in online gaming environments. It underscores the persistence of gender-based toxicity and the systematic challenges of sexism, despite gaming companies’ efforts towards more inclusive gaming spaces. The insights from this research contribute to the broader discussion on diversity in gaming.

KEYWORDS: *Online Gaming, Gamergate, Game Studies, Gender, Toxicity*

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Here it is! My master's thesis. marking the end of nine years as a student. After completing high school, I initially made the decision to pursue my education in tourism and aviation. Reflecting on my educational journey, I would have never imagined that I would end up here.

Writing this thesis about one of my passions, video gaming, feels like a full-circle moment for me in my life. It seems like it was just yesterday that my brother sparked my love for gaming when we played Rayman together on the PlayStation 1. Though this wasn't the only game we played, this one stuck out to me as probably one of my first experiences with video gaming. The PlayStation 1, which was later gifted to me for my birthday, remains a cherished possession as I still have it after all those years.

This thesis would not have been completed without the help and support of many wonderful people. I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to everyone involved. First and foremost, I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to my mother, who has been able to support me emotionally and financially throughout my education. Without her unconditional love and encouragement, I would not be where I am today, and for that, I am eternally grateful. To my grandma: thank you for being my biggest supporter! Your presence made the process of writing this thesis truly enjoyable. And of course, I can't forget to thank my sweet cat, Mimi.

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Before you read this, I want to issue a trigger warning that this thesis includes content that may be distressing or triggering for some readers. Specifically, this thesis contains the following: explicit language, instances of sexual harassment and threats of sexual assault.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the summer, a friend shared with me that she typically refrains from engaging in conversations in online gaming lobbies. Despite her extensive experience and impressive skills in some of these video games, her fear of potential toxicity and harassment underscores the unfortunate reality that prevents her from fully enjoying the gaming experience with others. Although at that point I had never joined or participated in online gaming lobbies myself, I completely understood how she was feeling in that moment. I perceived her experience as a universally relatable one that extends beyond gaming, one that women, including myself, may encounter in other aspects of life.

Fast forward almost a year later, I am signing into my Fortnite account, diving straight into the Battle Royale mode— an online shooter game where the ultimate goal is to outlast all the other players, and be the last person or team standing. Even though I have been practicing this game with my friends for the past few weeks and feeling pretty confident in my control and shooting skills, I can't help but feel kind of anxious. After all, this will be my first time joining a lobby with three strangers. The game begins and I already hear my teammates talking through their microphones. Then, one of them calls out my username, "MicrowavedPizza, you got a mic bro?" I hesitate for a moment, contemplating whether to switch on my microphone. Initially, my plan was to avoid using the voice chat, at least until later in the round. After going back and forth for a bit, I turn on my mic and respond with a simple: "Hi. Yes, I'm here." Almost instantly, the same voice blurts out, "Oh fuck, it's a girl." I chuckle, caught off guard by his sudden remark. Although I didn't see this as particularly toxic, it was this moment that stood out to me throughout my entire autoethnography. Perhaps because it was my first match playing with strangers, or perhaps it was the way my gender was specifically pointed out, something completely unrelated to the gameplay itself.

1.1 Societal and Scientific Relevance

While engaging in multiplayer gaming can have a positive influence on one's mental health by combating loneliness and promoting overall well-being (Jones et al., 2014, p. 1; Beres et al., 2021, p. 1; Johannes et al., 2021, p. 3), it occasionally presents a dual nature as negative events manifest, especially in online gaming lobbies (Liu & Agur, 2023, p. 602; Wong & Ratan, 2023, p. 2). Despite a growing body of gamers from various backgrounds, ages and genders, women are more inclined to experience higher levels of harassment (Anti-Defamation League, 2022, p. 9; Wong & Ratan, 2023, p. 3). Extensive research into this phenomenon unfolded around and after 2014, a year marked by notable events for women in gaming (Chess & Shaw, 2015, p. 209-210; Todd, 2015, p. 64; Mortensen, 2018, p. 788; Nieborg & Foxman, 2018, p. 112). The Gamergate controversy, in

particular, stands out as it resulted in the harassment of many women within the gaming industry. Delving into the evolving dynamics within the gaming landscape remains highly relevant today, as it highlights the persistent challenges faced by women, which are still evident years after the controversy. Therefore, this research will be valuable for scholars in game studies to provide a deeper understanding of the persistent gender dynamics within the gaming landscape. Moreover, this research can contribute to the understanding of toxicity within online gaming lobbies among game professionals and workers, thereby potentially accelerating the development of effective solutions to address this issue and eventually establish inclusive gaming environments.

1.2 Thesis Outline

This research combined a total of two methods: an autoethnography and in-depth interviews, to grasp and understand various experiences. Through the autoethnography I hoped to contribute to the broader discussion about inclusivity in online gaming environments, by sharing my firsthand experiences with toxicity. Therefore, this thesis not only aligns with my academic interests but also with my personal passion for video games. Additionally, by utilizing in-depth interviews, the goal was to further explore and discuss the various challenges faced within online gaming lobbies. This dual-method approach not only provides a thorough understanding of the diverse experiences of women in online gaming lobbies, it enhances the validity and depth of the research findings, therefore making it relevant for academia. The question this thesis focused on was the following: *How do female gamers experience gender-based toxicity within online gaming lobbies?*

In order to address the research question, the first section will outline a framework encompassing relevant theoretical concepts and existing research on the phenomenon. The methodology chapter will highlight the rationale behind the decisions made within this dual-method qualitative research. Chapter four will outline the results of the autoethnography, based on my firsthand experiences. Following this, Chapter five will present the findings from the analyzed data derived from the 11 in-depth interviews. Finally, this thesis will conclude with a discussion that highlights the findings and ultimately provides a comprehensive answer to the research question.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework integrates relevant literature and concepts to assist in tackling the research question. Within the theoretical framework, the following is explored: #Gamergate, toxicity in online gaming lobbies, internalized sexism, gender imbalance in the gaming industry and gendered playstyles.

2.1 #GamerGate

The Gamergate controversy, which surfaced around August 2014, can be considered as a significant setback for women within the gaming industry and those engaging with games, such as critics, video game developers and journalists (Chess & Shaw, 2015, p. 209; Ferguson & Glasgow, 2020, p. 1).

Prior to the controversy, instances of harassment of both women and critiques of journalism within the gaming industry were not entirely uncommon (Ferguson & Glasgow, 2020, p. 1). Scholars have been actively engaged with this phenomenon for close to a decade, concerning the concept of gender-based harassment, misogyny, anti-feminism and the prevalent masculinity within the gaming industry (Chess & Shaw, 2015, p. 209; Mortensen & Sihvonen, 2020, p. 1356). The precise origins of the controversy continue to be a topic of debate (Ferguson & Glasgow, 2020, p.1; Mortensen & Sihvonen, 2020, p. 1355). However, some scholars argue that it initially focused on ethics in journalism after an ex-partner of game developer Zoe Quinn accused her of using sexual favors in exchange for positive reviews for her game (Chess & Shaw, 2015, p. 210; Ferguson & Glasgow, 2021, p. 1). Additional instances of harassment within the Gamergate movements include incidents against game developer Brianna Wu, who was a very outspoken critic on the movement and game critic Anita Sarkeesian (Todd, 2015, p. 64; Mortensen & Sihvonen, 2020, p. 1356). Through a critical analysis of numerous games spanning from arcades to home video consoles, Sarkeesian aimed to highlight the longstanding trend of women's systematic marginalization in video games. This ranged from subtle reinforcement of gender stereotypes to instances of misogyny and violence (Borchard, 2015, p. 449). Following her request for donations via a Kickstarter campaign to create a YouTube video series on female representation and sexist themes in video games called '*Tropes vs Women*', she received an onslaught of misogynistic, sexist and hateful comments (Chess & Shaw, 2015, p. 210; Tompkins & Martins, 2022, p. 210).

In addition to experiencing harassment, the individuals in these cases have also been subjected to threats, including those of rape and death, along with instances of disclosure of their personal information on diverse websites, ultimately compelling them to flee their homes (Todd, 2015, p. 65; Salter, 2017, p. 21; Mears, 2021, p. 45). While the intensity of Gamergate has significantly diminished, the harassment towards some of these women is still apparent today (Mears, 2021, p. 46). The common thread among these cases is that the individuals are women who hold both a critical perspective on gender portrayal in video games and on the prevalence of hegemonic masculinity in the gaming industry, where the majority of employees are

men (Chess & Shaw, 2015, p. 209; Todd, 2015, p. 65). Although men working in the video game industry have also faced harassment for expressing support for their female colleagues, it is primarily women who have been targeted (Todd, 2015, p. 65).

Advocates of the Gamergate movement argue that there is corruption within video games journalism and assert that feminists are attempting to negatively impact the industry (Chess & Shaw, 2015, p. 210). Todd (2015) argues that although the Gamergate movement represents a minority fraction within the gaming community, their actions have highlighted an important issue: the gradual embedding of sexism and misogyny over time (p. 66). Some scholars frame the controversy as a complex intersection of media ethics, online culture and gender dynamics (Chess & Shaw, 2015, p. 216; Mears, 2021, p. 30). Mortensen (2018), approached this to show how complex the gaming community actually is, calling it a “child of the Internet” and how it cannot be distinguished from other forms of media (Mortensen, 2018, p. 13). Building upon this, Mears (2021) asserts that, similar to other mediums, online video game communities are shaped by the environments in which they are formed (p. 30). Therefore, the treatment of women in both gaming communities and society becomes interconnected to some extent (Mears, 2021, p. 30). This connection can be especially relevant for this research, as women’s experiences in the gaming community can relate to and influence the broader socio-cultural context.

2.2 Toxicity in Online Gaming Lobbies

Online multiplayer games are generally very competitive and often require players to interact closely. The goal is to develop a shared strategy, to tackle challenges together to secure a win (Neto et al., 2017, p. 26). However, toxic behaviour is frequently observed in online video games and can negatively influence the communication within a lobby (Monge & O’Brien, 2011, p. 83; Neto et al., 2017, p. 26). Female gamers frequently encounter not only general toxicity, but also instances of harassment that are specifically based on their gender (Anti-Defamation League, 2022, p. 20; Wong & Ratan, 2023, p. 2). The Anti-Defamation League’s annual report (2022) highlights that, for four consecutive years, gender stands out as the most frequently cited cause of online hate in the gaming community (p. 9).

While there is debate within academia regarding the definition of toxic behavior within gaming, the general consensus is that it is characterized by hateful and inappropriate actions towards other players (Neto et al., 2017, p. 27; Wijkstra et al., 2023, p. 2). Various degrees of toxic behavior can be present in team-based gaming lobbies, ranging from actions like criticizing a player’s skill, engaging in trash-talking and name-calling to intentional game sabotage such as leaving a match or disrupting other players. More extreme incidents can involve threats of violence, racist or sexist remarks and instances of stalking (Anti-Defamation League, 2022, p. 11; Wong & Ratan, 2023, p. 2-3). Moreover, sexual harassment, which targets one’s identity, can have a more negative impact than general toxicity (Pina et al., 2009, as cited by Wong & Ratan, 2023, p. 4). Sexual harassment within

online gaming lobbies has been linked to women dwelling on these negative experiences and avoiding video games (Wong & Ratan, 2023, p. 3).

For specific players, online gaming lobbies can present a hostile atmosphere, and exposure to such can result in psychological harm (Zsila et al., 2022, p. 359; Wijkstra et al., 2023, p. 2). It includes experiencing feelings of distress, a diminished sense of enjoyment, sadness, and in some cases, even withdrawal from the video game due to the toxic environment (Zsila et al., 2022, p. 359; Wong & Ratan, 2023, p. 4; Wijkstra et al., 2023, p. 2). This phenomenon is particularly evident among individuals who are perceived as outsiders (Beres et al., 2021, p. 1; Fox & Tang, 2014, p. 314; Wong & Ratan, 2023, p. 3). Despite women making up nearly half of the gaming community, they often still face minority status within these environments, making them vulnerable to harassment and toxicity (Chess & Shaw, 2015, p. 209; Wong & Ratan, 2023, p. 3). Moreover, when these women belong to marginalized groups based on race or sexuality, they are more likely to experience toxicity (Beres et al., 2021, p. 1; Zsila et al., 2022, p. 357). The prevalence of toxic behavior has been a longstanding challenge for gaming developers, as toxicity is characterized by its complexity and multifaceted nature, which cannot be effectively addressed through simple and straightforward punishments (Monge & O'Brien, 2021, p. 83). Furthermore, many gaming companies' policies do not explicitly define what toxic behavior and harassment entail, thereby complicating the handling of misconduct cases and enforcement of the rules (Anti-Defamation League, 2022, p. 29; Wong & Ratan, 2023, p. 3).

Aside from the psychological harm of online toxicity, Riot Games, the developer of the popular multiplayer video game League of Legends, explored the connection between toxic behavior and in-game performance (Neto et al., 2017, p. 33; Monge & O'Brien, 2021, p. 87). Their findings revealed a positive correlation between game losses and toxic behavior, indicating that teams that displayed no toxic behavior stood a better chance of winning compared to those that did exhibit toxicity (Neto et al., 2017, p. 33; Monge & O'Brien, 2021, p. 87). This underscores the fact that toxic behavior not only leads to unfavorable outcomes but also diminishes overall performance.

Numerous factors can contribute to the emergence of toxic behavior in online gaming lobbies. One prominent theory, the Online Disinhibition Effect Theory, suggests that within anonymous online settings, individuals feel less constrained to adhere to societal norms, resulting in behaviors or statements they might otherwise refrain from in face-to-face interactions (Cheung et al., 2021, p. 49; Liu & Agur, 2023, p. 601). This theory highlights two forms: benign disinhibition, where individuals engage in positive behaviours online and are inclined to share personal details and emotions, and toxic disinhibition, characterized by aggressive behavior and offensive language (Beres et al., 2021, p. 4; Cheung et al., 2021, p. 49; Liu & Agur, 2023, p. 601).

The research conducted by Liu and Agur (2023) revealed various motivations behind individuals' engagement in toxic behavior. These include "shirking responsibility", which entails a strong desire to win a match coupled with skepticism about teammates' abilities; "egocentrism",

manifested through self-centred behavior in the gaming lobby; “revenge”, which arises in response to undesirable actions by another player; “emotional catharsis”, where toxic behavior arises from external factors, such as being in a bad mood; and the “preservation of real-world interpersonal relationships”, whereby players prioritize assistance solely for those they personally know (p. 608-611). Other studies primarily highlight that other players’ poor in-game performance could trigger toxic behavior and simultaneously, that toxic behavior can lead to poor performance (Monge & O’Brien, 2021, p. 84; Zsila et al., 2022, p. 362).

These various motivations can be valuable for addressing the research question, particularly as this can be connected to the unique experiences of women navigating toxic situations within online gaming lobbies.

2.3 Internalized Sexism

David argues (2013) that recognizing any form of internalized oppression can be challenging, as it operates within our lived experiences (p. 199). Sexism, when ingrained in daily life, infiltrates individuals, thereby molding their beliefs, altering their approach to relationships and shaping how they engage with the world (David, 2013, p. 193). A core aspect of sexism, similar to oppression against any group, is the presence of an institutionalized power imbalance among two or more groups. In the context of sexism, men typically represent the group wielding oppressive influence, while women find themselves subjected to this oppression (Bearman et al., 2009, p. 14; David, 2013, p. 193).

Sexism manifests across a spectrum (Bearman et al., 2009, p. 11). On the one end, there are notable events such as sexual assault or harassment, workplace discrimination and the implementation of laws that restrict women’s rights (Bearman et al., 2009, p. 11). On the other end, there are indistinct instances of sexism that are part of everyday interactions and experiences (Bearman et al., 2009, p. 11). It frequently manifests unintentionally, with both the person perpetuating it and the one experiencing it unaware of its subtle presence in their interactions (Bearman et al., 2009, p. 11). It is important to note that gender roles inherently incorporate sexism. Biological sex is present from birth, whereas gender is a social construct (David, 2013, p. 196). Sexism is inherently intertwined with gender roles (David, 2013, p. 196). The concept of gender roles refers to the notion that specific attributes differentiate between men and women. These attributes encompass trait descriptors, physical characteristics and role behaviors (Eisend, 2019, p. 72). For example, trait descriptors such as compassionate or concern for others are associated with feminine gender roles, while traits such as assertiveness and independence are more aligned with the masculine gender role (Wilhelm, 2018, p. 225; Eisend, 2019, p. 72). This association is evident from early childhood, where girls are encouraged to be empathic while boys are encouraged to be brave, thereby shaping their internalization of gendered norms (Williams et al., 2009, p. 703; David, 2013, p. 193). Society expects individuals to conform to behaviors that are aligned with their biological

sex, those who deviate from traditional gender roles may face criticism (Bearman et al., 2009, p. 11; Williams et al., 2009, p. 703). Although the gender role system dehumanizes both men and women, the roles systematically disadvantage women (David, 2013, p. 197).

While men play a key role in perpetuating certain aspects of internalized sexism, it also encompasses the internal dynamics within the oppressed group, specifically focusing on how women perceive and interact with each other (Bearman et al., 2009, p. 14; David, 2013, p. 197). Internalized sexism creates division among women, instead of fostering unity against the “true” sources of inequality, it drives women to compete against each other (Bearman et al., 2009, p. 16). In other words, women suffer from internalized sexism while also inflicting harm on other women (Means, 2021, p. 5). At its core, this competition revolves around attaining external rewards, such as recognition, validation or even desired (male) partners. It manifests through behaviors like gossip, belittling others and social exclusion, all in pursuit of elevating oneself (Bearman et al., 2009, p. 16).

Another notable characteristic of internal sexism is objectification. David (2013) argues that media plays a significant role by overwhelming people with images of women, thereby shaping their perception to primarily view them as physical entities and objects of sexual desire (p. 204; Heflick & Goldenberg, 2014, p. 226). Furthermore, women depicted in the media often become targets of men’s sexist comments, sexual remarks, and behaviors (Szymanski et al., 2010, p. 10). In connection to the gaming industry, women in video games are portrayed in more sexualized and objectified ways, in stark contrast to men. They are frequently seen wearing revealing and provocative clothing that emphasize their unrealistic body parts and sexual appeal (Szymanski et al., 2010, p. 10; Tompkins & Martins, 2022, p. 401).

For decades, gaming has been predominantly tailored towards boys and men. Consequently, these marketing efforts reinforce specific gender roles. Shaw (2012) argues that this stems from the video game industry’s failure to acknowledge marginalized groups as part of the gamer’s demographic (p. 28). The history of women’s representation in media and the treatment of women in society, are all crucial elements that contribute to the perception of how women should look and act. Therefore, the way women’s recreational activities are perceived in society, significantly influences their participation and engagement within the gaming community (Mears, 2021, p. 41-44). In general, this perspective underscores the barriers that hinder the recognition of women as “legitimate” gamers (Ghosh, 2021, p. 4448).

2.4 Gender Imbalance in the Gaming Industry

Despite the rising presence of female gamers within the gaming community over the past few years, the growth in the number of women employed in the video game industry has only been minimal (Fox & Tang, 2014, p. 314; Chess & Shaw, 2015, p. 209). The 2021 satisfaction survey conducted by the International Game Developers Association continues to highlight a gender imbalance, with 62% of respondents identifying as male, contrasting with 30% who identified as

female. Additionally, 8% of respondents identified as non-binary (Weststar, 2022, p. 8). There can be various explanations for the absence of growth in female developers. Chess and Shaw (2015) argue that this primarily stems from the video game industry's failure to significantly embrace gender diversity (p. 209). The hashtag #1ReasonWhy, which trended on Twitter around 2012, prompted numerous women within the industry to voice their experiences. They highlighted workplace harassment and sexist remarks as significant factors contributing to the considerable gender gap in the industry (Hamilton, 2012, para. 2-4; Tompkins & Martins, 2021, p. 403).

This is particularly important as individuals working in the gaming industry, often unintentionally incorporate certain values and ideologies into games (Bulut, 2020, p. 329). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that there generally is a lack of female representation in video game content, and when present, they often conform to limiting tropes or stereotypical portrayals tailored to male audiences (Fox & Tang, 2014, p. 314; Mears, 2021, p. 40). The limiting portrayals were particularly evident in the 1990s and 2000s, where female characters were frequently depicted as being subservient to male characters and portrayed overly sexualized (Szymanski et al., 2010, p. 10; Tompkins & Martins, 2022, p. 401). Over the years, female characters have shown to embody more progressive attributes however, certain traits continue to persist (Tompkins & Martins, 2022, p. 401). This is essentially what game critic Anita Sarkeesian tried to highlight with her video series during the 2014 Gamergate movement.

2.5 Gendered Playstyles

Despite a nearly equal numbers of female gamers compared to male gamers (Chess & Shaw, 2015, p. 209; Wilhelm, 2018, p. 224) significant differences exist in the gaming behaviors of men and women (Wilhelm, 2018, p. 224). The differences evident in usage patterns, motivations, and genre preferences between genders are both influenced and molded by societal gender roles, alongside the prevailing presence of men within the video game industry (Poels et al., 2012, p. 634; Wilhelm, 2018, p. 224). Generally, men tend to gravitate towards competitive behavior, while women are more inclined towards cooperative behavior, preferring collaboration over competition (Poels et al., 2012, p. 634; Wilhelm, 2018, p. 227). These gaming styles pursue distinct objectives: the competitive playstyle strives for individual achievement, displaying dominance, defeating opponents and enhancing one's position within group hierarchies. In contrast, in cooperative play, the focus is on fostering mutual support and working together to achieve shared objectives (Wilhelm, 2018, p. 227). During gameplay, male players tend to adopt a more aggressive and confrontational approach towards opponents, while female players typically lean towards a more cautious and evasive strategy (Gao et al., 2017, p. 315). Connecting to this, male players generally gravitate towards action, shooter and sports games. These genres often feature intense competitive aspects, thereby aligning more closely with traits associated with the traditional masculine gender role (Wilhelm, 2018, p. 228; Chappetta & Barth, 2020, p. 162).

In these male-dominated gaming environments, women may try to balance the dynamics by expressing their femininity, often through the use of gendered avatars and usernames (Assunção, 2016, p. 49). Moreover, in video games featuring character creation options, women predominantly opt for female avatars, while men typically choose male characters (Chappetta & Barth, 2020, p. 163). Even in games with pre-built characters, female players still show a preference for characters of the same gender, compared to male players. This suggests that women prioritize identity relevance, while men focus on functionality when selecting their avatars' gender (Gao et al., 2017, p. 309). Consequently, this reinforces the notion that the majority of players expect a character's gender to align with that of the individual controlling it (Chappetta & Barth, 2020, p. 164). As a result, female characters may encounter more toxicity than fellow players, especially when adopting masculine in-game roles (Chappetta & Barth, 2020, p. 164). For instance, in World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), the role of *healer* is often associated with femininity, given that individuals in this role are responsible for healing teammates during gameplay. The role of *tank* however, tends to be associated with masculinity, as those in this position are typically tasked with leading the team (Chappetta & Barth, 2020, p. 164). The perception of these two in-game roles align with traditional gender roles, where women are expected to be nurturing and caring for others, while men are viewed as independent (Wilhelm, 2018, p. 225; Eisend, 2019, p. 72).

3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology chapter provides insight into the reasoning behind the decision-making process for this research, along with the underlying arguments that support these decisions. This research employed a dual-methodological approach to address the research question, consisting of an autoethnography and in-depth interviews, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of the topic. The autoethnography served as the starting point for the data collection and analysis, while the in-depth interviews facilitated a broader understanding of the concepts through the authentic experiences of active female gamers.

3.1 Autoethnography

To establish a solid foundation for the research, it was crucial to possess firsthand experience within online gaming lobbies. This experience played a pivotal role in crafting an effective interview guide and in subsequently analyzing the data. It was essential for formulating relevant and insightful questions, since my involvement in online gaming environments was limited and since I was unfamiliar with the technical aspects of these lobbies. Furthermore, this experience gave valuable personal insights into understanding the challenges and reality of being a female player within an online gaming environment. Not only did this experience contribute to addressing the research question, it also facilitated the rapport-building process during the interviews. By sharing my own gaming experiences, I aimed to establish common ground with the participants, thereby enhancing the depth of our discussions on the challenges we both encountered.

Autoethnography is the combination of an autobiography and an ethnography and utilizes the researcher's personal experience as the primary source of data (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 3; Chang, 2013, p. 108). The aim of this method is to enhance the understanding of specific phenomena by examining them through the researcher's personal experiences (Chang, 2013, p. 109). Adams et al. (2017) highlight several practices of autoethnography. First, an autoethnography provides personal narratives to supplement or address gaps in existing research (p. 3). These narratives may highlight how generalization in research can hide significant details within cultural issues. Secondly, autoethnography can provide insider knowledge of a cultural experience that may be inaccessible to others (Adams et al., 2017, p. 3). For example, an individual who has encountered cultural challenges or oppressions, such as racism, can express these issues in distinct ways compared to those with minimal exposure to these issues (Adams et al., 2017, p. 3). However, it is important to note that insider knowledge is not inherently more truthful than that of outsiders. Instead, it simply suggests that these stories can be narrated in unique ways that others may not be capable of achieving (Adams et al., 2017, p. 3). Another significant advantage of autoethnography as a method is the opportunity for individual creativity in writing. This not only facilitates exploration within a distinctive context but also serves as inspiration for other forms of research (Borchard, 2015, p. 447).

Ellis et al. (2011) outlines various approaches to conducting an autoethnography (p. 278). In this research, a combination of two forms will be employed: narrative ethnography, where

researchers explore their personal stories within a specific culture, while intertwining them with prior analyses of other researchers, and complete-member ethnography, where researchers immerse themselves as genuine members of the group under study (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 278; Chuang, 2015, p. 2). The primary data for the autoethnography was derived from my participation as a complete-member in online gaming lobbies, alongside other players.

Research has demonstrated that competitive video games, particularly those in the battle arena and shooter genres, exhibit a greater likelihood of encountering toxic behavior when compared to other gaming genres (Ghosh, 2021, p. 4450; Zsila et al., 2022, p. 357). Therefore, Fortnite (Epic Games, 2017), specifically the Battle Royale game mode, was played for the autoethnography. The primary justification behind opting for this game lied in its classification as an online shooter game, which can be played on multiple consoles. Fortnite (Epic Games, 2017) offers a diverse range of game modes, such as Fortnite Festival, which involves playing instruments with three other players by pressing buttons at the right moment to create an epic music festival featuring popular songs. Another mode, Fortnite Rocket Racing, which is not team-based, focuses on competitive racing against fellow players. While there are many other game modes that Fortnite (Epic Games, 2017) offers, the Battle Royale mode stands out as the most competitive. While the other modes are more focused on individual actions, Battle Royale emphasizes teamwork and strategic collaboration, underscoring the necessity of effective communication and coordination.

Fortnite: Battle Royale (Epic Games, 2017) features in-game lobbies that are equipped with voice chat, players can either participate in randomly generated lobbies or in a private lobby with friends. Additionally, the decision to focus on this game for the autoethnography was influenced by its availability, as it employs a freemium model. This implies that users can download Fortnite (Epic Games, 2017) for free, while providing the option to make in-game purchases to enhance the overall gaming experience. These purchases often include items such as character skins, diverse emotes such as popular dances and various other customization options.

Boellstorff et al. (2012) assert that achieving success in ethnographic research demands a significant investment of time, emotion, and energy (p. 56). The authors (2012) suggest that it is beneficial to make informal visits to the field site and fully immerse oneself in the environment before conducting the research (p. 53-54). Building upon this, Driscoll and Gregg (2010) contend that the informal visits to the field site must seamlessly integrate into the researcher's everyday life, as this integration enables meaningful participation in autoethnography. (p. 17). Since the essence of autoethnography lies in personal experiences, the more engaged and involved one is during the research process, the higher the quality of the resulting data (Boellstorff et al., 2021, p. 56).

Therefore, I began practicing Fortnite's Battle Royale mode (Epic Games, 2017) with friends three weeks prior to conducting the autoethnography. Typically, these gaming sessions occurred about three times a week, primarily in the evenings. On average, they spanned between one to two hours each evening. This allowed me to familiarize myself with the in-game map and the controller

dynamics. Preparation was essential for me to fulfil my role as a complete-member during the autoethnography. The actual gaming sessions for the autoethnography took place on Saturday March 30 on a PlayStation 4 console. I entered randomly generated lobbies and engaged alongside three other players each round. To ensure diverse interactions and experiences during the gaming sessions, I played a total of ten rounds, spanning over 1.5 hours in total duration.

3.2 Ethical Considerations for Autoethnography

Within qualitative research, ethical considerations carry significant weight. Specifically in the realm of digital spaces, ethnographers are confronted with new ethical challenges (Lester, 2020, p. 420). Edwards (2021) delved into various ethical considerations surrounding autoethnography in her paper. First, while informed consent is the foundation of many qualitative research methods (Brennen, 2017, p. 178), attaining it is not always feasible (Edwards, 2021, p. 2). In such cases, where obtaining informed consent is challenging, extensive anonymization of the individuals that are being discussed becomes essential (Edwards, 2021, p. 2). Generally, securing informed consent in online spaces is often difficult, if not downright impossible, especially on platforms where anonymity is already a built-in feature (Lester, 2020, p. 418). Furthermore, how a researcher perceives interactions in online spaces, whether as textual data or as human interactions, significantly influences ethical decision-making, given that texts cannot provide informed consent (McKee & Porter, 2009, as cited by Lester, 2020, p. 418). Within the scope of this research, the individuals participating in the autoethnography have already been anonymized, only identifiable by their assigned usernames. Moreover, the focus is not on specific individuals, but rather on the content, or texts, which are being expressed by them.

Second, within autoethnography ethical considerations extend to the researcher 's own well-being, as the researcher needs to delve into their own experiences, which entails revisiting past events that can be emotionally taxing or even painful (Edwards, 2021, p. 5). In the context of this research, I invited a friend to be present in the room with me during the autoethnography. Given the uncertainty of what might have unfolded during the gaming sessions, having someone to rely on in case of extreme toxicity was crucial for safeguarding my own well-being. If toxicity levels were to escalate, my strategy was to either decrease the number of rounds I played or exit a round entirely, depending on my emotional state at that time.

Furthermore, in autoethnography, where the focus is on one's experience, it remains crucial to uphold the value of respect and carefully choose words that embody this principle throughout the writing process (Edwards, 2021, p. 5). To ensure that respect was maintained throughout the autoethnography and that no other players were harmed by me (Brennen, 2017, p. 178), I adopted the communication style of Fedchun (2020). Fedchun has been an active player of League of Legends, an online team video game where communication with other players is crucial. She characterizes her communication style as feminine, placing strong emphasis on both positivity and mediation (p. 71). This is highlighted by her celebration of both personal accomplishments and those of her teammates.

Moreover, she actively engages in conflict resolution, fostering unity and propelling the team to move forward together. Her overarching objective within her communication style is to create a positive atmosphere for all involved—a goal which she acknowledges can be challenging to achieve at times (Fedchun, 2020, p. 73). If she is unable to mediate problematic team dynamics through positive interactions, she resorts to utilizing the mute function as an alternative approach (Fedchun, 2020, p. 74).

The primary justification behind opting for this communication style is its alignment with my own personality. Interestingly enough, I had unintentionally adopted this communication style while practicing with my friends weeks prior to conducting the autoethnography. During those gaming sessions, my friends, who were much more experienced in Fortnite (Epic Games, 2017), occasionally became overly competitive with each other, thereby affecting the overall team dynamic. As a result, I often found myself stepping in, trying to restore the balance in our lobby.

3.3 In-depth Interviews

The second approach that was utilized to answer the research question was justified by the fact that qualitative research aims to delve into people's experiences. This includes the meaning they give to their experiences and how social interactions influence them (Stutterheim & Ratcliffe, 2021, p. 9). Qualitative interviews emphasize on comprehending the information and opinions shared by each participant (Brennen, 2017, p. 29). Therefore, the decision to employ in-depth interviews was made. This approach was particularly suitable as it focused on capturing and comprehending experiences, in contrast to quantitative methods which primarily rely on numerical data and lack depth in terms of meaning (Babbie, 2017 p. 318-319; Brennen, 2017, p. 4).

The interviews followed a semi-structured format and incorporated a predefined set of questions. The semi-structured format allowed for the inclusion of follow-up questions to gain a deeper understanding into specific phenomena (Brennen, 2017, p. 29). The interview guide is displayed in Appendix A. Furthermore, it aided in comprehending the participants' distinct perspectives rather than relying on a generalized understanding of the phenomena (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p. 1358). Regardless of the format, in-depth interviews demand active listening, researchers must engage with the conversation while maintaining openness and flexibility throughout each interview (Brennen, 2017, p. 30). Based on the predominantly online demographic of the participants, the decision was made to conduct the interviews through various online meeting programs. Gray et al. (2020) state that the quality of online interviews matches that of face-to-face interviews (p. 1294). However, it can be argued that establishing rapport with interviewees is more challenging in online settings (Brennen, 2017, p. 30). Building rapport is especially crucial as it fosters a sense of comfort and safety for interviewees, encouraging them to openly share their experiences. Consequently, this may lead to a greater quantity of information being disclosed (Abbe & Brandon, 2014, p. 208; Meijer et al., 2021, p. 5). Establishing rapport can be achieved through several methods. For example, engaging in conversations about shared interests with the participants,

using similar language, or sharing personal experiences can all help in fostering a connection (Meijer et al., 2021, p. 5). My autoethnographic experience played a crucial role in the rapport-building process. By openly discussing the challenges I encountered while gaming, I created a safe space for interviewees to share their own experiences and thoughts. Through our shared understandings and experiences of toxicity in online gaming lobbies, we were able to have more meaningful and insightful conversations, thereby enhancing the depth and authenticity of these interactions.

To ensure sufficient data for analysis and based on the research's mandatory guidelines, a total of 11 interviews were conducted with English-speaking female gamers. The duration of the interviews ranged between 45 to 60 minutes. Prior to the interviews, participants were requested to fill out a consent form provided by Erasmus University Rotterdam. This consent form informed the participants of their rights and the goal of the study. The consent form is displayed in Appendix B. The individual interviews were recorded on an audio device for analytical purposes. In cases where participants did not complete the consent form, verbal consent was obtained before the start of the interview. The personal information of the participants was stored as confidential, and pseudonyms were assigned accordingly.

3.4 Sampling Strategy

Since this research focused on a specific group of people, purposive sampling was employed to select participants. Purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling method, intentionally selects cases based on the idea that individuals with specific characteristics offer crucial perspectives on the research topic, thereby aligning with the study's objective (Babbie, 2017, p. 201; Campbell et al., 2020, p. 654). Consequently, this enhances the study's credibility and ensures the reliability of both the data and the results (Campbell et al., 2020, p. 653).

The primary criterion for the sample was that it needed to consist of gamers who identified as female and actively played online games featuring an in-game lobby with voice or text chat functionalities. Furthermore, they were required to be at least 18 years old. During the interviews, flexibility regarding game genres was maintained to ensure a diverse range of experiences and perspectives within the different gaming categories. Participants were recruited through gaming-related Discord servers, as Discord is a platform that is generally known for being an app for gamers. The servers Euphoria, MSPNL 2.0 and Gamer Pixies were selected for participant recruitment, due to their primarily female user base, with Gamer Pixies even being exclusively for women. After getting approval from the moderators, an announcement post was published on the different servers to invite potential participants. The post also included the selection criteria. In total, six interviewees were recruited through purposive sampling.

Snowball sampling was utilized as a secondary sampling approach to ensure sufficient data for analysis. This sampling method is frequently employed in combination with purposive sampling (Parker et al., 2019, p. 4). It entails collecting data from a specific group of people in the population and requesting them to suggest individuals who meet the specified criteria for participation in the

study (Babbie, 2017, p. 200). This sampling method offers the advantage of accessing hard-to-reach populations more easily, while also fostering trust-building between potential new interviewees and the researcher, given that they are being referred by an individual who they trust (Cohen & Arieli, 2011, p. 428; Parker et al., 2019, p. 4). Through snowball sampling, an additional five people were recruited for the interviews. A clear overview of the 11 participants is displayed in a table in Appendix C.

3.5 Ethical considerations for In-depth Interviews

In the realm of ethical considerations for conducting in-depth interviews, Brennen (2017) emphasizes the critical importance of transparency, as there should be absolutely no deception regarding the objective of the research (p. 31). Moreover, respondents need to be protected from both physical and emotional harm during the interview (Brennen, 2017, p. 31). The researcher's role is to strive to understand the thoughts and emotions of the participants about a particular phenomenon. This can often pose a challenge, as participants may find it difficult to discuss personal matters and revisiting some of these past events may be distressing (Sutton & Austin, 2015, p. 226). Therefore, each respondent must provide informed consent before being interviewed and they should be fully informed about the study and how the research data will be utilized. At last, it is essential to respect respondents' right to privacy. If requested, it is critical to ensure the protection of their identity by anonymizing any identifiable information (Brennen, 2017, p. 31).

Prior to the interviews, respondents were requested to fill out an informed consent form. In cases where the form not completed, informed consent was obtained before the start of the interview. All participants were assigned a pseudonym, starting from Interviewee 1 to Interviewee 11. Any identifiable information was disclosed, such as usernames, to maintain confidentiality and protect the privacy of the interviewees. Moreover, given my now limited experience in online gaming resulting from the autoethnography, it was essential for me to approach the in-depth interviews without bias. Sutton and Austin (2015) contend that qualitative research demands reflexivity from the researcher, both before and after conducting the research (p. 226). Reflexivity entails acknowledging and addressing one's biases, which are largely inevitable, rather than attempting to disregard them. Researchers must reflect on it and transparently express their standpoint (Sutton & Austin, 2015, p. 226, Brennen, 2017, p. 177). Moreover, researchers must critically analyze the connections between themselves, the observed data, and the narrative they aim to construct from the data (Brennen, 2017, p. 177). It was particularly important to reflect during the formulation process of the interview questions and during the interviews themselves. Although my autoethnographic experience was crucially important for establishing rapport with the participants and for facilitating discussions about our shared challenges, I wanted to avoid influencing or directing the interviewees in any specific direction.

3.6 Operationalization

The primary concept embedded in the research question was gender-based toxicity in gaming lobbies; therefore, it is crucial to define this concept to ensure precise measurement. Building upon the in-game toxicity classifications of Liu and Agur (2023), the research of Wong and Ratan (2023), the study from Wijkstra et al. (2023) and, based on the findings from the annual survey conducted by the Anti-Defamation League (2022), the concept of gender-based toxicity was further defined.

Toxic behavior in gaming lobbies manifests in various ways, therefore it was categorized into three main types: behavioral toxicity, gender-based toxicity, and general verbal toxicity. Behavioral toxicity includes actions such as intentional game sabotage, entailing purposely leaving a round, and trolling, which involves engaging in sensation-seeking behavior game (Anti-Defamation League, 2022, p. 11; Liu & Agur, 2023, p. 608; Wijkstra et al., 2023, p. 1). Gender-based toxicity encompassed instances of sexual harassment, unsolicited advances, and threats of sexual assault (Anti-Defamation League, 2022, p. 11; Wong & Ratan, 2023, p. 3). At last, general verbal toxicity was categorized by offensive name-calling and criticism of a player's skill (Anti-Defamation League, 2022, p. 11; Wong & Ratan, 2023, p. 3). Appendix D presents a visual representation of the operationalization of the concept.

3.7 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was applied to the gathered data from the in-depth interviews. This method entails identifying and analyzing patterns within the data, which are then transformed into meaningful groups or themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79; Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 297). Thematic analysis is characterized by its flexibility, allowing for a diverse range of insights from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2006) highlight that the identification of themes can be achieved through two approaches: inductive analysis, involving themes directly derived from the data, and deductive analysis, encompassing a more detailed examination of specific elements within the data to support underlying theories (p. 83).

Thematic analysis involves several phases, which include becoming acquainted with the data, generating initial codes, organizing these codes into overarching themes, and reviewing the themes in alignment to the theoretical framework. At last, the themes should effectively illustrate how the gathered data addresses the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 86-93). In the context of this research, the identification of themes was done through deductive analysis, in alignment with the theoretical framework. The data derived from the interviews was primarily manually coded, with Atlas.ti used as a secondary coding tool. In the early stages of the data analysis, the manual coding procedure generated a total of 202 codes. Additionally, the utilization of Atlas.ti contributed to the identification of 51 additional codes.

4. #1 VICTORY ROYALE

As the first round is starting, I am chatting with my friend. Although she is new to Fortnite, she has had her fair share of toxicity in other online games. I am glad she could join me for today's gaming session; her presence offers valuable support if I need it. I am bit anxious about what might happen, as I did expect to come across toxicity. In the lobby, I already hear my teammates discussing tasks and where we were going to 'land'. Throughout my weeks of practice, I've grown familiar with the expansive Battle Royale map, filled with various fictional locations where one can gather weapons, ammunition and other items to outlast the other players. Suddenly, a teammate calls out my username, "MicrowavedPizza, you got a mic bro?" I hesitate before I turn on my mic and respond with a simple: "Hi. Yes, I'm here." Almost instantly, the same voice blurts out, "Oh fuck it's a girl." I chuckle, however, a few seconds later, he adds: "I didn't mean it like that." Despite the abrupt comment of my teammate at the start, we all engaged in small conversations about the newly added features of the game and providing basic information about enemy player locations. While the first round caught me off guard, the overall experience was surprisingly positive. The anxiety I felt before starting, had mostly faded by now. Moving on to the next round, I couldn't help but notice the message on the vibrant loading screen, while waiting to be placed in a lobby: "Fortnite should be fun for everyone, be welcoming to new players" (Epic Games, 2017). I was surprised and pleased to see a loading screen like this, as I had not previously seen this while practicing with my friends in the weeks prior. Perhaps Fortnite only displays these messages while queuing up in a random lobby, in that sense the game is trying to promote a healthy game environment for everyone.

While waiting for the fourth round to start, another colorful loading screen appeared, this time displaying another quote: "Everyone contributes in their own way, be open to different play styles" (Epic Games, 2017). This was also the first time I encountered this quote. By now, I'm convinced it's no coincidence; these loading screens only seem to appear in randomly generated lobbies. The fourth round was also notable as the first time I heard another woman speak. Despite not knowing her, I immediately felt a sense of connection. Aside from discussing strategies, we all talked about how our day had been, which time zones we were in, what we were up to and just some casual jokes flowing around. Suddenly bold letters flash across the screen: *#1 Victory Royale*, meaning that we had won! Almost immediately my teammates start cheering with excitement. This being the first victory in my autoethnography aligns with Riot Games' research, which demonstrates that teams exhibiting positive behavior have a higher chance of winning compared to those displaying toxic behavior (Neto et al., 2017, p. 33; Monge & O'Brien 2021, p. 87).

I queued up for another round, reaching the halfway mark of my originally planned ten rounds. While waiting, I overheard a man and a woman chatting, judging by their conversation they were a couple. After greeting them, the atmosphere shifted to a hostile one, their conversation abruptly halted after I tried to join in and just created an uncomfortable tension. Throughout the round, the woman made some shady and mocking remarks towards me, while her assumed partner

completely ignored her behavior. Because of their impressive skills, we won the round. However, winning felt less satisfying than the last time. I was simply relieved to exit that awkward lobby.

This experience aligns with Bearman et al. (2009), who assert that internalized sexism compels women to compete with each other for recognition, validation, or desired male partners. This competition often manifests in behaviors such as belittling others to elevate oneself (p. 16). Prior to conducting the autoethnography, this was certainly not something I had expected to happen. However, the experience itself left me with a weird and particularly confused feeling.

The final three matches of my autoethnography showcased various degrees of toxicity. While the team dynamics initially appeared to be positive and we discussed strategies during the early phases, toxicity became prevalent, specifically following defeats or after not being able to kill an opponent player. My skills were often criticized, with some teammates nitpicking my every action and even questioning if I was new. In some instances, I was called various names, such as “bitch,” “whore,” and “slut.” While I would never tolerate such behavior in real life, it did not bother me in this context. Instead, I chose to mute or simply ignore their comments for the remainder of the games. I noticed that the only time I spoke up to toxicity was during the last round, when one of my teammates was being extremely toxic towards a boy who sounded incredibly young. He was cursing at him, using racial slurs multiple times, and just overall displaying very toxic behavior. I immediately told him to “shut up” and to stop with this behavior. He did not take that very well, because he also started cursing me out, calling me offensive names, telling me to “stay in the kitchen” and to “kill myself.” Unsurprisingly, we lost that match, especially after another teammate abruptly left, perhaps due to the random outburst from the toxic man. This incident marked the sole occasion during my autoethnography where I reported someone, something that was remarkably easy to do.

A few days following the autoethnography, I discovered an unread chat message on my PlayStation 4 account. Although I did not recognize the username, I noticed that the message had been sent on the day that I conducted the autoethnography. The message itself stated that I had a “hot voice.” Even though I was unaware that strangers could send me personal direct messages, I was surprised that this was the only message I received, especially considering I did encounter some toxic people.

The autoethnographic experience provided me with a clear perspective on the reality of encountering toxicity in gaming. This experience established a solid foundation for continuing this research, aiding both in the interviewing and analysis process. Although the degree of toxicity varied between rounds, in most cases I encountered some level of it. Fortunately, the toxicity never escalated to a point where I felt compelled to exit the round. In most cases, toxicity arose after something went wrong during the gameplay, for example getting defeated or not being able to kill an opponent player. Connecting to this, prior research revealed that poor in-game performance is seen as a trigger for toxicity (Monge & O’Brien, 2021, p. 84; Zsila et al., 2022, p. 362). Other toxic

behaviors I experienced align with the research of Wong and Ratan (2023), who identified various forms of toxicity, including criticizing skills, trash-talking, (un)intentional game sabotage and sexist remarks (p. 2). Furthermore, other instances where I experienced toxicity connect to the research of Liu and Agur (2023), particularly the concept of “shirking responsibilities”, which involves having a strong desire to win, coupled with skepticism about teammates’ abilities (p. 608).

5. RESULTS INTERVIEWS

This chapter presents the findings derived from the conducted research, which involved a total of 11 semi-structured interviews, with the aim of addressing the research question: *How do female gamers experience gender-based toxicity within online gaming lobbies?* Throughout the interviews, the primary objective was to delve into participants' experiences with toxicity within online gaming environments. Additionally, the interviews aimed to identify different forms of toxicity, explore participants' responses to it and examine their strategies for handling toxicity. Aligned with the theoretical framework, the thematic analysis revealed several topics that corresponded to the discussed concepts. The data analysis procedure introduced 39 initial codes, which were linked to 7 overarching subthemes. The thematic analysis eventually revealed a total of four distinct themes, these were: Don't You Know that You're Toxic?, Go Back to the Kitchen, Respawn and Resist and Good Game. A clear overview of the coding process is displayed in Appendix E.

The first theme titled Don't You Know that You're Toxic?, identified various forms of toxicity encountered by female gamers in online gaming environments. Following this, the theme Go Back to the Kitchen, explored how female gamers experience toxicity, emotionally and physically. Additionally, it examined the overall impact of toxicity on their gaming experience, including behavioral changes to avoid toxic interactions. The third theme, Respawn and Resist, explored the diverse response strategies employed in the face of toxicity. At last, the final theme Good Game highlighted positive experiences within gaming despite the presence of toxicity.

To honor the voices of the interviewees, their quotes were presented from a feminist perspective, capturing their words exactly as spoken, including any swear words, trigger phrases and grammatical mistakes. This approach ensured that their experiences were accurately portrayed, by preserving the authenticity of their narratives.

5.1 Don't You Know that You're Toxic?

The first theme derived from the data highlights the various forms that toxicity can take. During the interviews, participants identified a range of toxic behaviors, some of which were perceived as more harmful than others. The primary focus during the interviews was on participants recounting their firsthand experiences with toxicity, identifying when toxicity usually occurred in their gaming sessions and describing the typical language that is used when they are confronted it. Examples of toxicity from the interviews ranged from trolling and hindering gameplay to verbal abuse, threats against family, sexual harassment and even threats of sexual assault. A key insight from the interviews is that toxicity, regardless of its form, often begins when something goes wrong during gameplay. Interviewee 1 elaborated on this: "When things go wrong, it's almost always when things go wrong. If someone dies or if something isn't going as fast, or as well as someone wants it to go." This corresponds to the narrative of Interviewee 6, who described a similar experience with another player:

I remember one time where I met someone online, and he was a really high rank [...] he was like: “oh, we could play together, I can teach you some tips and tricks,” and it was super nice. And then we played the game and we lost it, so I didn’t play very good. And then when we ended the game, he started raising his voice at me, screaming at me about how bad I am at the game and because I’m a girl I just needed to uninstall it. He was going all ham on me and I was just sitting there like, “what the fuck,” because he was like super nice before and then once the losing part comes, or someone the team doesn’t play good, they suddenly change into a toxic person.

The statements align with findings from previous studies, which highlight that mediocre in-game performance could trigger toxic behavior (Monge & O’Brien, 2021, p. 84; Zsila et al., 2022, p. 362). Furthermore, it resonated with my own observations during my autoethnographic experience, where toxicity often emerged when I was either defeated by an opponent or was not able to eliminate an enemy player. Regarding gender-based toxicity, Interviewee 6 provided additional insight into the matter:

If you’re playing bad, it’s just, you get *flamed*. [...] And then when they find out that you’re a girl as well, you get flamed extra because they end up like: “Oh yeah, must be because you’re a woman, go back to the kitchen, make me a sandwich,” that kind of comments.

In this statement, the term *flamed* refers to being subjected to toxic and abusive language from other players in the game. It specifically underscores the gendered perceptions that female gamers encounter, it reflects the stereotype that women are inherently bad at gaming. Many interviewees with extensive experience into certain games noted that when having a few poor rounds, it frequently gets unfairly linked to their gender. Another notable aspect from the data is that all participants experienced some form of gender-based toxicity, ranging from subtle sexist phrases to more severe ones. The phrase “go back to the kitchen,” was mentioned in almost every interview. While some may brush this off as casual banter, it reinforces the idea that women are still not welcome in these predominantly masculine online gaming environments, and implying they should go to spaces where they supposedly “physically belong.” When asked about other typical language that is frequently used when encountering toxicity, Interviewee 1 mentioned a few things that have been said to her:

Well, the saying “you suck” and all that shit, that’s what I encounter the most. But I have gotten more severe things like, “I’m gonna rape you” and all that shit. That’s been said to

me, “I’m gonna kill your family,” “go kill yourself.” They act like it’s very normal to say, it’s not, but yeah, that gets used as well.

The narrative of Interviewee 1 highlights various forms of verbal toxicity, ranging from personal insults, to threats of sexual assault and violence against her family, Interviewee 8 who had encountered numerous toxic situations, provided further insight:

They will start like trying to degrade your lifestyle. I feel like that’s the first thing they go to. They will call you fat, not that there’s anything wrong with that in my opinion, they have no idea what I look like. So, I obviously shouldn’t take offense to it, but it’s like the tone, it’s so aggressive, it’s really uncomfortable. They call you “fat,” “ugly.” They say that “you will die alone,” “go back to the kitchen.”

The various examples of encountered toxicity reinforce the findings in of Wong and Ratan (2023), which highlights several forms that toxicity can take within online gaming, such as trash-talking, sexist remarks and threats of violence, with some of them being more severe than others (p. 3). Several interviewees mentioned that encountering various forms of toxicity is almost a daily occurrence, highlighting that it has become an anticipated aspect of their gaming experience.

In addition to verbal toxicity, there are subtler, more action-based instances of toxicity. Interviewee 11 highlighted that sometimes upon hearing her voice in a lobby, people will directly leave the game. Interviewee 6 delved deeper into this matter by explaining: “The moment I open my mic to communicate [...] and they notice that I am a girl, they instantly become very rude. They’re like: ‘Oh, it’s a girl, we’re going to lose,’ ‘GG.’” The term GG is an abbreviation for good game and is typically said after a match finishes. In this context, the use of this phrase implies that having a woman in the lobby will result in the team’s defeat. This particularly connects to the research of Liu and Agur (2023), which suggests that some players have a strong desire to win and are skeptical about teammates’ abilities (p. 608-611). Based on the statements of the interviewees, this skepticism is particularly evident when it comes to assessing the skills of female gamers. Additionally, I can relate this to my first experience in my autoethnography, although the match had not yet begun, my teammate felt compelled to randomly mention my gender, perhaps implying that our chances of winning were diminished because of it. When discussing other instances of behavioral toxicity, Interviewee 1 highlights some of her experiences while playing World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004):

[...] people will just outright leave and what you were doing in that moment, you can’t complete it. So not only did you just waste your time because someone left, they also instantly stopped you from completing something you wanted to do. So, I don’t think that the

toxicity is worse, but it has more consequences because someone has power over you, stopping you from doing something.

The Anti-Defamation League (2022) recognized intentional game sabotage, such as deliberately leaving a round, as a form of toxicity (p. 11). Interviewee 1's statement additionally highlights the power dynamics that can be present within online gaming lobbies. In relation to this, Interviewee 7 noted that in ranked games where victory is crucial for advancing levels, she often feels compelled to tolerate toxicity in order to avoid losing. Interviewee 5 introduced the concept of smurf accounts, when discussing the matchmaking system in online games, which typically groups players who have a similar level:

It is that people create a new account, so they can start from level 1 again. They are being put in matches with people who are actually level 1. So, the good people get matched with the normal, average level. And the people there, they just like to flame people, they put in extra work to flame the people who actually just started playing.

This statement sheds light on a concerning aspect of gaming lobbies, suggesting that the in-game matchmaking systems can be manipulated by placing skilled players against newcomers. This results in unfair gaming dynamics and a potential rise in toxicity aimed at new players. Based on the observed data, female gamers encounter various instances of toxicity, encompassing both verbal and behavioral forms. Verbal toxicity manifests through generally mean comments, sexist language, critiques of skill and even threats of violence. In addition, female gamers find themselves subjected to behavioral toxicity, including actions such as deliberately leaving a game and targeting less experienced players. In alignment with prior research, toxicity tends to arise in response to setbacks or perceived failures within the gaming lobby. The degree of toxicity female gamers encounter varies widely, with some instances being relatively mild while others escalate into more severe forms.

5.2 Go Back to the Kitchen

The second theme discovered from the derived data focused on the participants' experiences when confronted with toxicity. It became evident during the interviews that all 11 interviewees had encountered some form of toxicity while being in an online gaming lobby. The questions aimed to explore how participants felt when confronted with toxicity and the impact of it on their overall well-being. Additionally, it focused on the impact of toxicity on the participants' overall gaming experience. Many of the interviewees had some form of emotional response to the toxicity they faced, with the intensity of these emotions ranging widely, from general frustrations to severe anxiety. Some interviewees even implemented significant changes in their online gaming routines in reaction to longstanding toxicity. Several participants mentioned the emotion of disbelief and

confusion, like the narrative of Interviewee 3 who states: “Sometimes I get confused, ‘cause like what did I do to get your toxicity right now? Anger or disappointment... and concern as well.” When questioned about specific emotions evoked by encountering toxicity, Interviewee 6, with a particular emphasis on gender-based toxicity, expressed:

Sometimes it really gets into my head. It’s not that I get sad about it anymore, because I know it’s just random people. So, it doesn’t affect me as much, but it’s just my own perfectionism. Like I want to play good and if I already know that I’m playing bad, and people start pointing it out and start assuming it’s because of my gender... I don’t necessarily feel sad anymore, but more disappointed or something. Because there is always this image of girls like: “oh, girls are getting boosted online, they can’t play games,” so you kind of want to prove those men wrong, you know.

The narrative of Interviewee 6 specifically reflects the bias that suggests that women are inherently less skilled at gaming, despite this perception being unrelated to actual gameplay and being mostly perpetuated by stereotypes. In relation to this, Interviewee 1 compared gender-based toxicity to general toxicity:

It’s worse, because they will instantly go to the women suck at gaming in general, that we are weak, that we don’t deserve anything else than being in the kitchen, that we are nothing but sex objects and all that shit. And I’ve never seen that being said to a guy. It’s so much more personal.

This statement highlights the gendered nature of toxicity in gaming. Female gamers perceive gender-based toxicity as a personal attack that targets their identity, contrasting with the more general toxicity that is typically directed at male gamers (Anti-Defamation League, 2022, p. 20; Wong & Ratan, 2023, p. 3). In connection to this, Interviewee 8 shared a similar experience:

Sometimes the toxicity you encounter is just someone picking on your playstyle but, if it’s gender-based, I will think about it for a couple of days after, I don’t know. It’s uncomfortable to mix real life in the game [...] There’s a lot of mean comments like that, you know? And the mean comments don’t hurt as much as the ones that are like heart felt. Because sometimes there’s heart felt hate, honestly that’s what it feels like [...] It’s the really thought out, horrid shit... like this guy would hurt me in real life, it feels like you know.

These statements align to the research of Wong and Ratan (2023), which indicates that toxic behavior that targets one identity can have a more negative impact than general toxicity.

Furthermore, it has also been linked to women dwelling on these negative experiences (p. 3). The narratives of the interviewees reflect that encountering toxicity, particularly gender-based toxicity, deeply affects them on both a personal and emotional level. These experiences highlight its enduring effect, as it lingers in their thoughts for significant time after the encounter.

Aside from experiencing emotional reactions when faced with toxicity, some even experience severe physical reactions. Interviewee 8 explained: “I used to have the whole anxiety package, you know, heartbeat and even started sweating and everything.” Other physical reactions she experienced were stomach-aches and an overall nauseous feeling. Interviewee 11 also acknowledged an instance where she had a physical reaction in response to a toxic lobby environment:

I had this one time where I talked, and I basically got flamed by everyone. They called me like horrible things. It got so bad that I even cried. And the worst thing was that there was a woman in that game and she was the one that started flaming me. That is what made it even worse, because I am so much like girls support girls.

Aside from toxicity being able to significantly impact the well-being of female gamers, these statements particularly highlight the physical toll it can take. In addition, the statement of Interviewee 11 aligned with my own personal autoethnographic experience, where another woman was being toxic towards me, it connects with an encounter shared by Interviewee 7:

I was playing as solo [...] and this one girl was playing in a duo, and it was with a man. I was giving basic callouts and she started to get irritated, like: “Why are you talking to me?” Like, this is such a basic thing, you’re just giving callouts. I’m doing this with everyone in the scene. But she got irritated when that happened and started giving backhanded compliments, they were not even compliments [...] just trying to bring me down to get attention from her duo.

Our shared experiences may be attributed to internalized sexism, which compels women to compete against each other, often resulting in behaviors such as gossip and belittling others in an effort to elevate oneself (Bearman et al., 2009, p. 16). Beyond these experiences being inherently toxic, they also evoke a sense of betrayal, as Interviewee 3 expressed: “[...] it’s already bad enough with the toxicity we get from men, we don’t need more of it.”

The persistent toxicity has led female gamers to make significant changes in their online gaming behavior. During the interviews, various behavioral reactions in response to toxicity arose, such as opting to play exclusively with friends, using a voice changer and deliberately avoiding certain games. Overall, most of the participants occasionally felt hesitant to engage in online gaming

due to their past encounters with toxicity. Interviewee 3 described her pre-gaming ritual, highlighting her concerns for the gaming sessions ahead:

[...] I always text my best friend and she texts me as well, like: “Oh god, I’m gonna queue alone, wish me luck.” You’re just very hesitant to even join the game online just because you’re a woman, you just don’t want to encounter toxicity.

In connection to this, Interviewee 5 explained how she and her friends intentionally choose their game mode based on their current mood, making a distinction between normal and ranked games:

[...] It depends on what we want to do or who we want our opponent to be. Because when we play ranked, we know there’s going to be toxic people. So, we have like the expectation, if we are going to play a certain game or competition, we know there will be toxic people. If you play a normal game, it’s just for fun, just to chill.

While the ranked systems may vary across different games, they typically assign each player a rank that reflects their skill level. One’s rank is usually determined by their number of wins or kills. As mentioned in Interviewee 5’s statement, ranked games are characterized by their more serious and competitive nature. Interviewee 6 additionally shared her perspective on ranked game modes and particularly her strategy while playing them:

[...] good-ranked people are really toxic towards women. So, whenever I play ranked, I don’t play alone. Because I know people are going to get toxic with me and if I am playing with someone I know, they can at least stick up for me. So, I know that there’s at least someone in the lobby that I feel comfortable with.

Related to this, despite World of Warcraft’s (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) absence of a ranking system, Interviewee 8 elaborated on why she only plays certain in-game roles exclusively with friends rather than with strangers:

[...] When I talked about the tank role before, it’s kind of scary [...] I just don’t do it with strangers anymore [...] Eventually, the sort of wall you have to climb, it becomes taller every time you sign or log on, it’s like harder and harder to start. So actually, now I only play as a damage dealer with strangers. If you make a mistake, nobody notices basically. And then I play as a tank with my friends, because they are supportive regardless.

During the interview, she additionally pointed out that when she did play as a tank with strangers, they typically did not expect her to be a woman. However, upon discovering her gender during gameplay, the other players would criticize her decisions and skill level—something that did not occur when her gender was unknown. Her experience specifically connects to the research of Chappetta and Barth (2020) who highlight that the role of tank is typically associated with masculinity (p. 164). This in-games role reflects traditional gender roles, where men are seen as leaders and women are expected to be caretakers. Consequently, those who deviate from traditional gender roles, or in this instance, in-game roles, may encounter criticism (Bearman et al., 2009, p. 11; Williams et al., 2009, p. 703). In addition to only playing specific roles or game modes with certain people, Interviewee 1 explained her reasoning for only playing Overwatch (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016) at particular times:

I stopped playing Overwatch for a couple of months, because of the toxicity [...] I play it until I get all the shiny stuff, but then I just won't touch it again. I enjoy playing because I want to collect the shiny stuff, but if there's nothing I can get then I don't want to endure the toxicity to get it.

This statement is particularly noteworthy for highlighting that toxicity is anticipated and something one must accept in order to attain external rewards. Aside from playing only a certain amount of time, Interviewee 8 mentioned even entirely avoiding some games, despite never playing them:

[...] I have friends that play some games, but they tell me their stories and I'm like: "I don't want to touch that game." That's also kind of the case with Call of Duty, I don't play much anymore because the few experiences that I had were toxic or where I've heard enough from other people about it. Yeah, so I definitely 100% control what games I choose to play.

Interviewee 1 shared a similar perspective, opting to entirely avoid specific games despite never having played them. These statements align with previous research suggesting that toxicity in some cases leads to withdrawal from the video game (Zsila et al., 2022, p. 359; Wong & Ratan, 2023, p. 4; Wijkstra et al., 2023, p. 2). One notable aspect from the statements is that toxicity is anticipated in certain game modes, prompting female gamers to play with people they are familiar with to endure the hostile environment. Moreover, negative experiences shared by others significantly seem to impact the decisions of female gamers whether or not to engage with a particular video game, thereby shaping perceptions and expectations before they even join a match or start playing the game. Beside refraining from engaging with certain games or only playing with certain people, some female gamers take extra measures to avoid toxicity by choosing gender-neutral

usernames and sometimes even using a voice changer. Interviewee 7 explains her decision for choosing gender-neutral usernames:

[...] I choose my names like random things. For example, my username is Red, so they don't expect a woman to have that name. And if I don't talk, they don't understand that I'm a woman when we're playing, so they act different before I even start to talk.

I can connect this statement to my own autoethnographic experience, although I didn't intentionally choose a gender-neutral username when I created my PlayStation account nearly a decade ago, within the various lobbies I joined there frequently was an assumption that I was not a woman. Some female gamers take further precautions to avoid toxicity. Interviewee 6 reflects on her experiences when she used a voice changer:

I would say the type of comments that you get, they depend on whether the person knows anything about you [...] I have noticed a huge difference between using a filter, where you have like a very flat robot voice, so that they can't tell that you're a woman.

The narrative of Interviewee 6 particularly emphasizes the effect of altering one's voice through a filter and how it influences the communication dynamics within online gaming lobbies. Furthermore, it highlights a stark contrast in treatment based solely on the perceived gender of the player during voice chat interactions. In addition to voice chat, many online video games also provide an in-game text chat feature. Interviewee 1 elaborated on her strategy for avoiding toxicity when using text chat: "If I don't have to talk, I even try my best to make my typing sound like I'm a guy. I use words like 'mate' and then they might not think I am a woman."

According to the statements, female gamers frequently experience toxicity and mostly always have some sort of emotional, or even physical, reaction to it. The severity of the toxicity seems to connect with the intensity of the emotional reactions, with gender-based toxicity seen as particularly harmful as it attacks female gamers on a personal level. When confronted with gender-based toxicity, female gamers dwell on the experience, although not necessarily for an extensive period. Most of the toxicity is expected and perceived as normal, leading to a gradual decrease in emotional reactions among female gamers over time. However, despite the sometimes decrease in emotional reactions, female gamers frequently make significant changes in their gaming behavior due to past toxic encounters. Most interviewees expressed hesitancy to use the in-game voice chat. Additionally, many participants preferred to play certain games or specific game modes only with friends. Some female gamers take more extreme precautions to avoid toxicity, such as choosing gender-neutral usernames and using voice changers in online gaming lobbies. The use of voice changers in particular, was described to be notably effective, resulting in significantly less toxicity

from other players within gaming lobbies, thereby highlighting the different interactions based on one's perceived gender.

5.3 Respawn and Resist

The third observed theme highlights the various ways participants handle their emotions after experiencing a toxic situation. Throughout the interviews, emphasis was placed on their strategies for responding to toxicity, whether they sought support from others, and their experiences with in-game reporting systems. Overall, various response strategies emerged, ranging from reporting players to muting them or even displaying toxic behavior in return. Interviewee 1 highlighted several strategies she employed in response to encountering various forms of toxicity, whether directed at herself or at her friends:

If it's nothing bannable, like just someone saying that "I suck," you can't get someone banned for saying that, then I don't respond to it at all. [...] If its reportable, I'll report it and continue playing the game. And sometimes I even tell them like: "Look, I'm reporting you because that is not okay, you shouldn't say that." Obviously there are times where I'm like, well it's happened five times today now, I'm a bit sick of it, I don't want to play anymore, but I try not to because I don't want to let toxic people ruin my life [...] If however someone does it to one of my friends [...] I will also be kind of toxic back and I'm not proud of it, I just try to protect my friends as they will sometimes sit with it for weeks and they'll be sad and depressed and shit

The narrative of Interviewee 1 reflects a multi-faceted approach for dealing with toxicity in online gaming lobbies. In case of minor instances of toxicity, she typically chooses to ignore it. However, when faced with more severe forms of toxicity, she takes action by reporting the toxic players. Additionally, when her friends are targeted, she occasionally responds with toxicity to defend them. Another notable aspect of this statement is that she strives to prevent toxic encounters from affecting her overall gaming experience, although she acknowledged that this can be challenging at times. Throughout the interviews, the act of reporting emerged as one of the predominant response strategies discussed. Interviewee 8 shared her perspective when questioned on whether or not she had ever reported someone: "I do it all the time, they could pay me to be a moderator at this point. I report anything from soft curse words like "bitch," to the horrid stuff. Because, I think that's what it's for." Interviewee 5 shares a similar perspective when asked the same question:

I think unless you're going to report something, then the game developers would not know and it's not gonna help. And the nice thing is, sometimes you get a message for basically

helping out the community, and it helps, they do something and it kind of makes you feel like you're not doing the stuff for nothing.

While some participants were satisfied with the in-game reporting systems and how they addressed toxic behavior, others highlighted their limitations stating that these systems often overlook specific instances of toxicity. Interviewee 3 shared her experience with reporting, particularly concerning instances of sexism:

You don't really get banned for saying something sexist, I noticed [...] You're not going to get banned for saying disrespectful stuff about women. You're only going to get banned if you call someone a whore, I think. They ignore the sexist comments in general.

Interviewee 9 shared a similar perspective, noting that reports often do not lead to action when a player exhibits sexist behavior. Interviewee 2 provided another example highlighting the inefficacy of reporting systems in addressing particular forms of toxicity:

[...] in some points they're already doing a fine job, like with racial slurs. Using those makes sure you get banned pretty quickly, if it's said in text or voice chat [...] I remember another incident it was two guys singing a nazi song, I reported it, and nothing happened. I even wrote a full-on ticket on the website, and I explained exactly what happened in a really long paragraph. I'm sure it was like six or seven sentences. And the message I got back was that they couldn't find any violation of the in-game rules. And while they understand that this behavior is annoying and bothering, they can't do anything against it. I was really shocked, they sang a nazi song and said nazi things, but it wasn't enough to get them banned. So, I don't think the in-game reporting system works well enough.

These statements particularly reinforce the findings of the Anti-Defamation League's annual report (2022), who argue that the policies of various gaming companies lack clear definitions of toxic behavior and harassment. This complicates the handling of reported cases and the enforcement of rules (p. 29). Furthermore, the interviews highlighted varying response times from gaming companies. While some female gamers noted receiving a response for their report within a few minutes, others mentioned their report could take up one to three days in certain games. Interviewee 1 further mentioned having a sense of frustration when reporting a player:

[...] when you do report someone, you also get a message if they are actually banned, so you know that it's working. But yeah, in the actual moment, when you report someone it doesn't

really feel like they're doing much, because you go to the next game and someone else is being toxic.

This statement particularly reflects the persistent nature of toxicity in online gaming lobbies, noting it as a challenging issue that doesn't easily go away with one report. In addition to reporting, another prevalent strategy after encountering a toxic situation was seeking support from others, primarily friends. Interviewee 9 highlighted how venting to her friends is the most helpful coping mechanism after experiencing toxicity. Similarly, Interviewee 2 noted that discussing toxic experiences with others provides emotional support, but it isn't always enough to fully move past toxicity:

I always talk about it to someone and complain to them, either my friends, even my guy friends and, sometimes I even tell my boyfriend. I just need to let it all out and then I'm fine usually after a few hours. But some incidents stick with me a lot longer, like surely a couple of days that I will think about it.

In some instances, female gamers find themselves compelled to respond to the toxicity, leading to potential reports. Interviewee 6 shared how she adjusted her strategy after facing repercussions from the reporting system multiple times:

I instantly mute them because, before I would go against it and talk back as well, but they would give me like penalties. They would like restrict me from using chats for like two weeks and I don't want to get restricted for defending myself anymore. So nowadays I just mute myself and them.

Based on the insights, female gamers employ various response strategies to cope with toxicity in online gaming. These strategies range from directly reporting offenders to muting them, to seeking support from others and in some cases, responding with toxic behavior. The act of reporting emerged as a predominant response strategy, with participants sharing mixed feelings about its effectiveness. Overall, it reflects a need for clearer policies and more effective enforcement of the rules by gaming companies, to create a safer and more inclusive gaming experience, particularly given that many participants noted that sexist comments were found not violating the current in-game policies.

5.4 Good Game

The final theme derived from the data highlights the positive experiences when gaming online. Although all interviewees experienced some form of toxicity at least once, they predominantly view their gaming experiences as positive. During the interviews, various positive

aspects of online gaming lobbies were highlighted. These ranged from meeting new people, creating communities and improving English skills to the satisfaction of accomplishing goals together. Despite the prevalence of toxicity, female gamers continue to engage and participate in online video games due to these aspects. Interviewee 1 elaborates further on this:

I mean, I know we talk about toxicity, but there's also obviously lovely people in every game and sometimes they're like: "Well, that person was an absolute dick, let's find someone else again." Because we all try to find our little groups of friends and hang out with those that are nice, but toxicity is louder and that's why you see it so much more.

The narrative of Interviewee 1 specifically emphasizes the resilience of gamers in navigating toxic environments. Furthermore, it underscores the importance of connecting with positive individuals who contribute to fostering enjoyable gaming experiences. Interviewee 9 shared a similar narrative, emphasizing why she continues to find online gaming enjoyable:

I know in the back of my head that not everybody is toxic, and of course you are going to have bad days and, maybe you have some bad days next to each other. But, a lot of people are just really wholesome and nice, and that is what I always hope for and why I continue playing games.

Interviewee 9 particularly highlights the contrasting experiences while also acknowledging the occasional persistence of toxicity. In relation to this, Interviewee 5 described her perspective on the matter:

Most people are pretty chill because they also want to have a fun time playing games. So, most people are fine, but there are also some, you could say, rotten apples, that just ruin the mood for everyone else sadly.

These statements reflect the encountered positive experiences while playing with strangers. Although many participants acknowledged occasional negative and toxic encounters that significantly impacted their gaming experience, positive interactions with others in gaming lobbies are prevalent. In connection to this, Interviewee 9 further emphasized feeling notably more comfortable when other women are present in the gaming lobby. She further expressed: "[...] mostly they are happy, they are friendly and really want to play together." This statement reflects what I experienced when conducting the autoethnography, in the fourth round I came across another woman in the lobby, I instantly felt a sense of connection, although it was the first time I actually met her. Similarly, Interviewee 1 expressed a comparable narrative, explaining how she feels more at ease

with other female gamers and how they are mostly always supportive and have each other's back. Several interviewees highlighted the various enjoyable conversations that occur in gaming lobbies, often extending beyond the realm of gaming itself. When questioned about the typical topics discussed in online gaming lobbies, Interviewee 6 provided further insight into the matter:

It depends on the mood or the group. Sometimes we talk about the news of the day. Let's say someone died or something, or something happened. [...] So, we talk about that, or we just talk about our days, how our days have been [...] and sometimes just random things.

Interviewee 9 shared her approach for engaging in conversations, as she first assesses the atmosphere in the gaming lobby:

[...] I'll see what they are talking about, and if im feeling it I join in. If it is like something simple, or not too deep, then I just join the conversation. [...] But, like the topics would be: when someone has a weird username, like they are called potato or something, then I would ask something about that. Something silly, I guess.

Interviewee 4 described the diverse interactions she has with others as fun and enjoyable, while further emphasizing that there are genuinely nice people beyond those who are not. These statements in particular reflect the positive lobby dynamics and the memorable conversations taking place in them. During my autoethnography, I was also able to come across engaging lobbies, where we were able to discuss topics outside of Fortnite (Epic Games, 2017). Aside from the interactions with others, Interviewee 7 highlighted another positive aspect of gaming lobbies:

I don't play on my own server, like on my own country server, I play on Frankfurt, so that I can talk in English and meet new people and like improve my English better. I usually ask them about themselves, and you know, what things they like.

In addition to this statement, she also mentioned forming numerous new friendships over the years, some of whom she still maintains daily contact with. In connection to this, Interviewee 8 discussed her own longstanding community in World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), where she made many of her friends over the years:

And the whole reason that I play World of Warcraft so much is because of the community. You can't have that in games where you just join and play around. There's also strangers and stuff, but here, you can have a community that's safe to hang out with.

She further elaborated on her community's goal to create a safe space that is free of drama. Additionally, while not all online video games offer the formation of personal communities, Interviewee 8 emphasized that women in particular can benefit from these kinds of communities. The insights reveal that female gamers still enjoy participating in online gaming lobbies, despite having to make significant changes to their gaming behavior at times. Many participants noted the importance of assessing the lobby environment before speaking up. However, when the atmosphere is positive, female gamers enjoy engaging in conversations with others in the lobby, leading to the formation of friendships, with some lasting for years. Although female gamers frequently have positive experiences within gaming lobbies, toxic interactions still significantly affect them, diminishing both their enjoyment and overall gaming experience.

6. CONCLUSION

This research aimed to explore how female gamers experienced gender-based toxicity in gaming lobbies, by answering the research question: *How do female gamers experience gender-based toxicity within online gaming lobbies?* This research further aimed to explore women's past encounters with toxicity, including typical occurrences of toxic behavior, typical language used and their strategies for dealing with such situations. Most importantly, it sought to discover the diverse personal impacts of gender-based toxicity on female gamers, something that manifested in various forms. Considering the deeply rooted presence of toxicity within gaming environments and its expression in various forms, it is important to note that addressing the research question requires more than a single straightforward action.

Beyond merely listening and discussing the experiences of active female gamers within the community, I personally delved into the realm of online gaming lobbies to directly experience their dynamics. While I initially anticipated to encounter toxicity during the autoethnography, my goal was to observe my own reactions towards it, especially as a woman who was new to the online gaming scene. Reflecting on my experiences as a newcomer, I encountered various levels of toxicity in certain rounds, primarily through verbal abuse and sexist name-calling. Although the toxicity didn't significantly bother me during the autoethnography, I believe that long-term exposure could potentially impact my well-being. However, ten rounds was too brief to observe any noticeable changes in this regard. To effectively participate as a complete-member (Chuang, 2015, p. 2) during the gaming sessions, I had the opportunity to practice with my friends in the weeks leading up to conducting the autoethnography. Without this prior skill development, I believe I would have encountered more severe toxicity, as poor performance was often a significant trigger for toxic behavior during the autoethnography. Previous studies have highlighted that low in-game performance can trigger toxicity (Monge & O'Brien, 2021, p. 84; Zsila et al., 2022, p. 362), something that was further confirmed by many of the female gamers participating in this research.

Connecting my own interpretations to the findings derived from the in-depth interviews, it is evident that online gaming lobbies continue to remain a hostile environment for many female gamers. Even almost a decade after the Gamergate controversy, women are still being told, either verbally or behaviorally, that they do not belong in these predominantly masculine spaces. This underscores the persistent gender bias within the gaming community. Toxicity's focus on gender particularly impacts women's participation and enjoyment in online gaming. For many interviewees, it was not their skill level, gaming strategy or communication that triggered toxicity, but rather their identity as female gamers. The persistent stereotype that exists within the gaming community, suggesting that women are inherently less skilled at gaming, occasionally leads to toxicity before a gaming session even begins. When female gamers do exhibit mediocre performance, it gets unfairly linked to their gender rather than their actual gameplay abilities— something that is rarely applied to male gamers.

As discussed in the theoretical framework, Wong and Ratan (2023) highlight that identity-targeted toxicity has a more negative impact than general toxicity (p. 3). Aligning with this theory, female gamers perceive gender-based toxicity as a more personal attack, causing it to linger in their minds longer compared to general toxicity. They particularly dwell on such toxicity, as it directly targets their identity. The persistent reinforcement of gender dynamics in gaming lobbies results in female gamers experiencing various emotional, physical and behavioral reactions. Although only a few participants mentioned the physical toll toxicity can take, it underscores the severity of the phenomenon and its impact on female gamers.

Moreover, it prompts them to take significant measures in order to avoid gender-based toxicity. For instance, female gamers use voice changers, which was noted to be particularly effective, underscoring the difference in treatment based on the perceived gender of the player. Additionally, female gamers often opt for gender-neutral usernames to avoid being targeted based on their gender. In more severe cases, they may avoid certain games altogether due to the toxicity, reinforcing the findings of previous research (Anti-Defamation League, 2022, p. 15; Wong & Ratan, 2023, p. 3). Another notable finding of this research is that the experiences of other female gamers significantly influence the decision whether or not to engage with a particular video game, even if they have not personally encountered the toxicity themselves.

Despite the prevailing gender bias within online gaming lobbies, female gamers acknowledge that the positive interactions mostly outnumber the negative ones. This finding resonates with my own experience, while I encountered toxicity in certain rounds, it did not discourage me from occasionally joining random generated lobbies with strangers, even now, weeks after conducting the autoethnography.

Shaw (2012) argued over a decade ago that the video game industry fails to acknowledge marginalized groups, including women, as part of the gamer demographic (p. 28). This argument continues to exist and perpetuates certain stereotypes, hindering the recognition of women as “legitimate” gamers. Despite numerous efforts by gaming companies to create more inclusive gaming environments (Monge & O’Brien, 2021, p. 83; Wijkstra et al., 2023, p. 1-2), this research demonstrates that extensive progress is still required. It underscores the necessity for clearer policies and stricter enforcements to effectively address gender-based misconduct in online gaming lobbies.

However, video game communities are shaped by the environments in which they are formed (Mears, 2021, p. 30). Therefore, the gaming industry is not solely responsible for the persistence of these issues. Cultural context, including societal norms and traditional gender roles, influence how gender dynamics are perceived and reinforced within these online environments. From this perspective, addressing these issues not only requires changes within the video game industry, but also efforts to challenge and redefine these ingrained stereotypes that continue to persist within the broader society.

6.1 Limitations and suggestions for future research

This research provides valuable insights into the experiences of female gamers facing toxicity and its effect. However, certain limitations must be considered. First, while this research included a diverse range of female gamers from various backgrounds, the majority were based in European countries. The findings might have differed if female gamers from other continents and regions were included, given that sexism operates on both local and global scales, with perceptions varying across different cultures. Therefore, having a more diverse range of interviewees is crucial to gain a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of toxicity among female gamers. This offers an opportunity for future research to include female gamers from various parts of the world, providing deeper insights into this pervasive phenomenon.

Second, while toxicity in gaming has been extensively studied in academia, there remains a gap in research specifically focussing on individuals who exhibit toxic behavior. This presents another opportunity for future research to explore why individuals choose to engage in toxicity, what triggers such behavior and the ways in which they express it.

In the realm of autoethnography, I had the opportunity to firsthand experience gaming lobby dynamics as a newcomer. Several interviewees noted that toxicity is particularly evident in high-ranking lobbies of online video games. Future (autoethnographic) research could delve into the dynamics and prevalence of toxicity in high-ranked gaming lobbies. Additionally, future autoethnographic studies could explore toxicity in other gaming genres. While limitations exist, the findings from this research contribute to the broader discussion on diversity and inclusivity in gaming, it provides a foundation for future research to build upon.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Guide

Icebreaker

Is this your first time being interviewed?

Gaming

When did you get into gaming?

What kind of games do you usually play? What online games do you play?

Can you tell me about your gaming habits? Do you usually play alone or with friends?

What do you enjoy the most of this game/while playing this game?

Have your gaming habits changed over time?

When you are in a lobby, do you discuss topics outside of the game? What are these about?

Toxicity

Do you encounter toxicity when you are gaming? How much? Would you say this differs between the different games that you play?

When do most of the toxic moments happen?

Have you noticed typical behaviors or language that is used when you deal with toxicity?

Can you tell me about an instance where you encountered toxicity while gaming?

Would you say you experience more toxicity because of your gender? Would men receive the same frequency of toxic behavior? Would you say it affect their gaming experience in the same way?

How would you define gender-based toxicity?

How do you perceive gender-based toxicity compared to other forms of toxicity?

In your opinion, what factors contribute to the existence of gender-based toxicity in online gaming?

Do you feel there is a stigma around being a female gamer?

Has there ever been an instance where another female gamer was being toxic towards you?

Emotions

How do you typically respond to (gender-based) toxicity when you encounter it during gaming?

Can you tell me about any specific emotions that come up when you encounter (gender-based) toxicity?

How do you typically cope with the emotions that arise after encountering toxicity?

Have there been instances where toxicity has affected your overall mood or well-being outside of the gaming session?

Have you ever felt discouraged or hesitant to participate in online gaming due to toxicity? Did you

ever avoid a game entirely because of toxicity?

Have you noticed any long-term effects on your emotional well-being as a result of repeated toxicity?

Have you ever sought support from others, such as friends or family, when dealing with toxicity in gaming lobbies?

Have you ever reported someone for displaying toxic behavior?

Do you feel that reporting systems within games address instances of (gender-based) toxicity?

In what ways, do you feel games could better address (gender-based) toxicity?

APPENDIX B

CONSENT REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATING IN RESEARCH

FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, CONTACT:

Samira Jansen, 664694sj@eur.nl

DESCRIPTION

You are invited to participate in a research about gender-based toxicity in online gaming lobbies. The purpose of the study is to understand how female gamers experience toxicity and how it impacts them and their gameplay.

Your acceptance to participate in this study means that you accept to be interviewed. In general terms, my questions will be related to your online gaming habits, moments where you encounter toxicity and how you typically respond to it. Additionally, I will ask you to reflect on specific instances of toxicity you have encountered.

Unless you prefer that no recordings are made, I will make audio recording of the interview.

I will use the material from the interviews exclusively for academicwork, such as further research, academic meetings and publications.

RISKS AND BENEFITS

As far as I can tell, there are no risks associated with participating in this research. I will not use your name or other identifying information, such as your username or your gamertag in the study. To participants in the study will only be referred to with pseudonyms, and in terms of general characteristics such as age and gender, etc.

You are always free not to answer any particular question, and/or stop participating at any point.

TIME INVOLVEMENT

Your participation in this study will take 45 to 60 minutes. You may interrupt your participation at any time.

PAYMENTS

There will be no monetary compensation for your participation.

PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS

If you have decided to accept to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. If you prefer, your identity will be made known in all written data resulting from the study. Otherwise, your individual privacy will be maintained in all published and writtendata resulting from the study.

CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS

If you have questions about your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact –anonymously, if you wish— Leandro Borges Lima, borgeslima@eshcc.eur.nl

SIGNING THE CONSENT FORM

If you sign this consent form, your signature will be the only documentation of your identity. Thus, you **DO NOT NEED** to sign this form. In order to minimize risks and protect your identity, you may prefer to consent orally. Your oral consent is sufficient.

I give consent to be recorded during this study:

Name

Signature

Date

I prefer my identity to be revealed in all written data resulting from this study

Name

Signature

Date

This copy of the consent form is for you to keep.

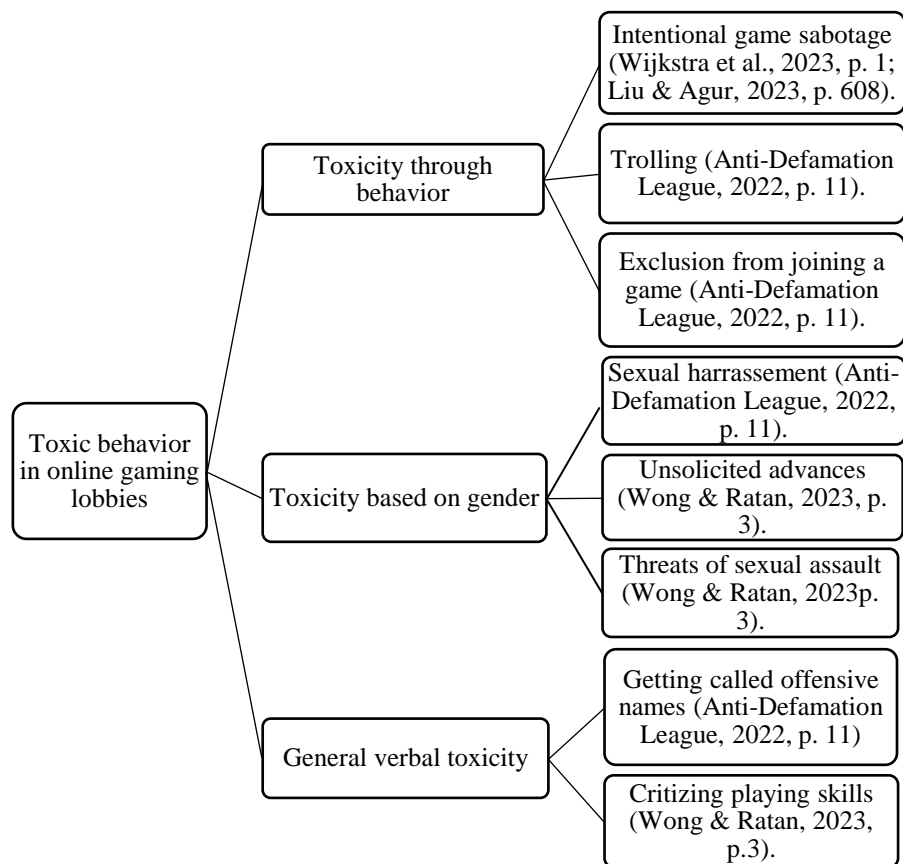
Thank you kindly for your participation
I am grateful that you will be helping me in finishing my master thesis

APPENDIX C

Participant	Age	Country of Residence	Game genre	Game(s)	Date	Setting
Interviewee 1	28	United Kingdom	MMORPG/ Tactical Shooter	World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004)/ Overwatch (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016)	3 April	Zoom
Interviewee 2	23	The Netherlands	Tactical Shooter/Battle Royale	Valorant (Riot Games, 2020)/Fortnite (Epic Games, 2017)	3 April	Teams
Interviewee 3	24	Germany	Tactical Shooter/ First- person Shooter	Valorant (Riot Games, 2020)/Call of Duty (Infinity Ward, 2022).	3 April	Teams
Interviewee 4	20	Italy	First-person Shooter/ Tactical Shooter	Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 (Infinity Ward, 2023)/ Valorant (Riot Games, 2020)	9 April	Discord
Interviewee 5	25	The Netherlands	Online Battle Arena/ Tactical Shooter	League of Legends (Riot Games, 2009)/ Overwatch (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016)	10 April	Teams
Interviewee 6	25	The Netherlands	Online Battle Arena/ Tactical Shooter	League of Legends (Riot Games, 2009)/ Valorant (Riot Games, 2020)	11 April	Discord
Interviewee 7	27	Turkey	MMORPG/ Tactical Shooter	Rainbow Six Siege (Ubisoft, 2015)/ Valorant (Riot Games, 2020)	15 April	Discord
Interviewee 8	31	Norway	MMORPG/ First-person Shooter	World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004)/ Call of Duty (Infinity Ward, 2022).	15 April	Discord

Interviewee 9	24	The Netherlands	Battle Royale/Online Battle Arena	Apex Legends (Respawn Entertainment, 2019)/ League of Legends (Riot Games, 2009)	16 April	Discord
Interviewee 10	21	Poland	Tactical Shooter	Overwatch (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016)/ Valorant (Riot Games, 2020)	20 April	Teams
Interviewee 11	22	The Netherlands	Tactical Shooter	CS:GO (Valve Corporation, 2012)/Valorant (Riot Games, 2020)	24 April	Discord

APPENDIX D



APPENDIX E

Initial codes	Subthemes	Themes
Sexual harassment Threats of sexual assault Threats towards family Racial slurs Sexist phrases Gendered perceptions Trolling Use of Smurf accounts Being dismissed Hindering Gameplay	Verbal toxicity Behavioral toxicity	Don't You Know that You're Toxic?
Frustration Discomfort Anxiety Concern Anger Distress Disbelief Stomachaches Feeling nauseous Crying Adrenaline rush Sweating Feeling hesitant to play Hesitant to use microphone Avoiding certain games Gender-neutral usernames Use of voice changer	Emotional reactions Physical reactions Action-based reactions	Go Back to the Kitchen
(Mass) Reporting Defiance Perseverance Finding distractions Seeking support from others Muting Quitting the game	Response Strategies	Respawn and Resist
Social interactions Improving English Overcoming challenges Supporting other women Achieving goal together	Positive Experiences	Good Game