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Audiences

Research Questions:

RQ1: How does patriarchy affect women's engagement with team-based games?

RQ2: What can be done to get more women into team based games?

Women make up 46% of gamers, with 49% of women regularly playing shooters (McBean, 2025), so whilst games are played by people from all sorts of backgrounds, how is gaming still seen as a man's hobby (Shaw, 2010)? In this literature review I will be discussing the possible reasons as to why this is through exploring the research question: how does patriarchy affect women's engagement with team based games? The answer to this is that the prevalence of sexual harassment against women causes them to withdraw from playing online games (Fox and Tang, 2016). Women who do continue to play, team based games in particular, are often forced into more submissive roles such as 'support' (Ratan et al., 2015), or stop playing/interacting with strangers – instead opting to play only with males they are familiar with (Deng, 2024). In response to these findings, I will explore the question; what can be done to get more women into team based games? First of all, women's voices need to stop being silenced, and men need to stop erasing women from online gaming spaces – there is evidence of this changing for the better over the past few years, but there is still a long way to go (Declercq, 2023). Game developers and companies managing such games need to assertively enforce measures to; punish misbehaviour, foster a supportive environment, and uplift women's voices. Ultimately a cultural shift needs to be encouraged that redefines gaming spaces as gender neutral, removing the male hegemony that pervades it.

One way in which patriarchy affects women's engagement in team based games is through women's avoidance of games due to sexual harassment from males (Fox and Tang, 2016). One study found that over half of the women surveyed had endured sexual harassment in online games, whilst just under half had also witnessed it (Zhou and Peterson, 2024). There have been numerous other studies that support the assertion that women disproportionately face frequent sexual harassment whilst gaming (De Letter, Van Rooij and Van Looy, 2017) (McLean and Griffiths, 2018) (Lopez-Fernandez et al., 2019) (Tang, Reer and Quandt, 2019). Sexual harassment against women when gaming leads to rumination, and sometimes a subsequent

withdrawal from gaming (Fox and Tang, 2016), to back up this claim; it has been found that women are more affected by toxicity than men are, and receive it mainly due to their gender (Bergström and Ericsson, 2020). Men are often seen as the 'superior gender' in gaming spaces, "Women cannot enter the gaming community without thinking about their gender, whereas the men...have the privilege to join without the same consideration" (Declercq, 2023). This dichotomy in women's engagement compared to males, shows how differently women engage with the medium - therefore providing a potential reasoning as to their treatment within it. Being a male within gaming is seen as the 'norm', whereas women's intrusion into the space demeans them to the label of 'other'. This makes women identifying themselves as a gamer, much more difficult as the term is so tied up in 'maleness'. Furthermore; women who are strongly connected to their gender identity as a woman are even less inclined to identify as a gamer. It was also noted in this study how some women often overcompensate within gaming spaces for the transgression of their gender by overtly showing their femininity whilst gaming. Which in turn, leads to more sexist attacks from males (Vermeulen, Van Bauwel, and Van Looy, 2017). The toxic gamer culture that exists within online gaming spaces can oftentimes force women to present as more feminine, leading men to view them only as 'objects of desire' who are then subsequently demonised when they take autonomy over their sexualisation (Ruotsalainen and Friman, 2018). The hypocrisy of males vilifying women's sexuality and then co-opting it for their own online self-identification through a 'kawaii masculinity' that is accepted within gaming spaces (Ruotsalainen, 2022), could show another reason as to why women disengage with team-based games. It is difficult to engage with a space where simply your existence as a woman marks you for sexual harassment, and to then see males taking on feminine identities with no similar, or as vehement, backlash is unjustifiable and indefensible. Furthermore, this could be frustrating to view and complicated to deal with without attracting further harassment. For many women, simply disengaging with team based games is the unfortunate result due to the hostile environment.

Another reason as to how the patriarchy affects women's engagement with team-based games, is through women being forced into the role of support. In one examination of women League of Legends (League of Legends, 2009) players, it was found that women felt 'compelled, pressured, or otherwise directed toward playing the Support role that...is nonetheless seen by many players as subordinate' (Ratan et al., 2015). Another study explored the reasons as to why women play the role of support; one reason being out of obligation, and another being gendered socialisation due to the role of a support being viewed as more 'passive and nurturing'. (Austin, 2020). These studies show how the oppressiveness of patriarchy permeates into the gaming sphere, it has been noted in a discussion by a self proclaimed radical feminist how patriarchy is the reason for female subordination – male's power throughout history has allowed them to continuously subject women to lesser treatment at a systemic level

(Jóhannsdóttir, 2009). It can be concluded that women feeling like they have to play support is simply an extension of this societal subordination from the patriarchy.

There is a stereotype that women are bad at games (Mcdaniel, 2016), but this is not a fact. One study found that women gain skill at the same rate as men in first person shooters (Spence et al., 2009). An explanation for this stereotype is that first person shooters take time to learn the skills required to be a competent player – but the harassment that women face causes them to stop playing before they can put in the time to acquire such skills (Hopp and Fisher, 2017). So, what can be done to combat this and encourage more women to play team-based shooters? Firstly, it is relevant to discuss what coping mechanisms women already deploy. One study found a variety of responses women have: leaving online gaming, avoiding playing with strangers, camouflaging their gender, deploying their skills and experience, and adopting an aggressive persona (Cote, 2017). Some of these are not ideal as they force women to change, rather than the males who are causing a need for such a response in the first place.

The first recommendation is to create more supportive online spaces: it has been found that online spaces within games that are tailored towards inclusion through harsher rules on harassment and general unsportsmanlike behaviour, foster a better environment for all players (Richard and Hoadley, 2013). It should be the responsibility of developers of online games to ensure their spaces are safe and inclusive, there needs to be stricter rules for in game conduct (Galindo-Ramirez, 2025). Visible role models could also help to attract and retain women in team-based shooters; esports dominates the genre yet there is a lack of women who get to take part in the competitive aspect – with the only notable player being ‘Geguri’, a tank player for the team Shanghai dragons in the Overwatch Esports league (Liquipedia Overwatch Wiki, 2019) who faced unprecedented levels of harassment (Ahmed and Donni, 2024). There needs to be solidarity within esports among women players to allow them to exist without persecution for their gender (Crothers, Scott-Brown and Cunningham, 2024). Companies need to promote women as well, there has been a failure to do so such as when Blizzard partnered with twitch to give viewers of certain streams Overwatch 2 beta keys – yet they did not promote any women during this event (Declercq, 2023).

In conclusion, patriarchy permeates into the gaming sphere by negatively affecting women's enjoyment of team based shooters. It causes women to stop playing, reinforcing the stereotype that gaming is a man's hobby. It is a self perpetuating cycle of women not playing long enough to gain the skills that allow them to play on the same level as men – as seen in the lack of women esports players (Darvin et al., 2021). Women who do continue to play face barriers such as increased stress whilst playing against perceived men (Vermeulen, Núñez Castellar and Van Looy, 2014), and being pigeonholed into the role of support. These all contribute towards turning gaming into a hostile environment for women to take part in, as well as removing their

agency to play how they wish to. In order to change this and allow women to play freely without barriers, there needs to be a cultural shift; masculinity within games needs to be redefined, which has already had implications for retaining women players of shooters (Lindmark, 2019). Developers need to cultivate spaces where women don't have to contend with their identity as both a 'woman' and as a 'gamer' (Dessart, 2022), allowing them to play without the ramifications brought on by how their gender is persecuted under patriarchy.

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