

«WHO'S THE GIRL NOW?»: THE #GAMERGRRRL TOGETHERNESS ON TIKTOK

«¿QUIÉN ES LA CHICA AHORA?»: LA ALIANZA DE LAS #GAMERGRRRL EN TIKTOK

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Abstract: Despite research highlighting the prevalence of sexism towards women in the video game industry, the resistance discourse of newer generations of gamer girls has been largely overlooked. This study focuses on the TikTok posts of gamer girls, who purposefully assume various gamer girl personas to challenge prevailing stereotypes within gaming communities. Embracing the principles of the Riot Grrrl manifesto, the research involves an examination of 161 TikTok videos featuring the #GamerGirl hashtag. The analysis explores how these gamer girls use the platform to construct an affective discourse, shedding light on the sexism and harassment they experience in gaming culture. Through their creative and ironic performances, these young girls effectively subvert traditional norms, posing a direct challenge to the male-dominated narrative pervasive in the gaming industry. This dynamic fosters a «gamer Grrrl» togetherness sensibility on TikTok, wherein these individuals employ ludic caricaturization to diminish the significance of their gender in their interactions with other gamers.

Keywords: Gamer Girl; Videogame Culture; Gender Stereotypes; Togetherness; Feminism; Riot Grrrl.

Resumen: Pese a los estudios que ponen de relieve la prevalencia del sexismo hacia las mujeres en la industria de los videojuegos, el discurso de resiliencia de las nuevas generaciones de mujeres *gamer* ha recibido mínima atención. El presente estudio se centra en las publicaciones en TikTok de las chicas *gamer*, que asumen voluntariamente diversos roles para desafiar los estereotipos imperantes entre las comunidades de videojuegos. Siguiendo los principios del manifiesto Riot Grrrl, la investigación analiza 161 vídeos de TikTok con el hashtag #GamerGirl. El análisis explora cómo estas *gamers* emplean la plataforma para construir un discurso afectivo, revelando el sexismo y el acoso que sufren en dicho entorno cultural. A través de sus actuaciones creativas e irónicas, estas jóvenes subvierten de manera efectiva las normas tradicionales, planteando un desafío directo a la narrativa masculinizada omnipresente en la industria del videojuego. Esta dinámica fomenta una sensibilidad y alianza «*gamer Grrrl*» en TikTok, en la que las jóvenes recurren a la caricaturización lúdica para minimizar la trascendencia del género en sus interacciones con otros *gamers*.

Palabras clave: chica gamer; cultura del videojuego; estereotipos de género; alianza; feminismo; Riot Grrrl.

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, online gaming has become highly relevant for new generations of gamers, resulting in a «gaming boom» (Ružić-Baf *et al.*, 2016). However, these gameplayers do not focus solely on video games. Currently, new generations (De-Paula, 2021) express their interest in video games through social media platforms such as YouTube (Young & Wiedenfeld, 2022), Twitch (Taylor, 2021), and TikTok (Tran, 2022), and by sharing and engaging in self-promotion and subcultural communities. These experiences have led to different trends, in which gamers routinely play different video games on different consoles and platforms, interact with other gamers, follow video game streamers, and belong to local and international communities (Yim *et al.*, 2023).

In this context, the concept of the «gamer girl» refers to adolescent girls or young adult gameplayers who engage in video games through the Internet and showcase their passion for gaming on social media (Beaves & Charles, 2017; Carr, 2007; Tran, 2022; Xuejing-Yao *et al.*, 2022). However, this notion frequently leads to hostility towards girls who openly express their gaming interests on digital platforms (Austin, 2022). In this sense, sexist comments from fellow gameplayers persist within this online gaming community (Ansari *et al.*, 2019).

Such abusive behavior, disguised as gender-based jokes, has prompted girls to withdraw from online gaming, hide their gender, mute their microphones, ignore comments, block users, or exclusively play with other girls (Dowell, 2022). In fact, they have been understood as less skilled and casual gamers, facing confinement to «feminine» roles and seeking acceptance through associations with men (Yim *et al.*, 2023; Ruotsalainen, 2022). This is a completely different idea from the «hard-core» gamers, who are recognized for their competitive prowess (Paaßen *et al.*, 2017).

In this context, digital platforms such as TikTok, with over 1 billion users (TikTok, 2023), are attracting new generations of gamer girls (Jaffar *et al.*, 2019). It has emerged as an optimal platform for the formation of in-groups (Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin, 2022), providing an environment conducive to the proliferation of memes (Zulli & Zulli, 2020). In particular, its growing significance as a novel entry point in gaming is noteworthy. TikTok's user-friendly features for creating short-form videos (Zeng *et al.*, 2021) facilitate the showcasing of newly launched video games (Birt & Fisher, 2022), creation and dissemination of trending posts, gaming-related discussions, and establishment of gaming communities (TikTok for Business, 2022).

These communities navigate the «For You Page (FYP)», which serves as the primary interface for user engagement. This system, developed following the merger of its Asian counterpart Douyin and Musical.ly in 2018 to create a global entity, employs sophisticated algorithms to personalize content based on users' interests and engagement patterns (Kang & Lou, 2022). The intricate logic behind this algorithm aims to optimize the scrolling experience. As a result, today TikTok's stands as a cornerstone of popular social media, solidifying its global reputation as one of the top five most downloaded applications worldwide (Business of Apps, 2024).

Beyond its popularity, TikTok serves as a space for playful sociality (Abidin, 2021) and participatory community practice reminiscent of the sub-cultural movement known as «Riot Grrrl» (Hebdige, 1979; Tulloch *et al.*, 2019). Based on this foundation, the main objective of this research focuses on investigating the phenomenon of performative practices among gamer girls who use the #GamerGirl hashtag on TikTok to assert their presence and significance in video game culture. The study seeks to achieve two specific objectives: (1) delving into the discourse surrounding gender stereotypes directed at gamer girls, (2) and exploring the performative roles adopted by gamer girls, contributing to the formation of a collective sense of solidarity, often termed as «Grrrl togetherness».

The analysis of #GamerGirl TikTok posts reveals how these users challenge hyper-masculinized discourses, fostering a «Grrrl gamer togetherness» that celebrates diversity and sorority. Drawing from media feminist resistance (Harvey, 2020), the findings suggest that gamer girls actively reshape their roles within the gaming culture, reclaim agency, and foster a more ludic and inclusive environment.

1.1. Role of girls in gaming communities

Video games provide immersive environments that promote engagement and community building (Establés *et al.*, 2019). Social connectivity is evident in e-sports, online gaming, and social media (Ruberg *et al.*, 2019). However, emerging generations have revealed strained attitudes towards gender.

The inclusion of women in the history of video games is often regarded as a positive step towards fostering inclusivity. Nevertheless, this approach neglects a critical examination of how gender influences access to opportunities within specific temporal and spatial contexts (Nooney, 2013).

This study analyzes how young girls' perceptions of gender identity on social media platforms such as TikTok underscore the need for a more nuanced understanding of how gender intersects with digital culture. The research was guided by the premise that the chronicle of video games repre-

sents an ongoing process of multidirectional creation, recreation, and repair, wherein technology and digital platforms shape the emergence of cultural identity networks (Pow, 2019).

Exploring how video games have served as catalysts for social change and resistance against gender-based oppression and discrimination constitutes a significant area of study within academia. To enhance the understanding of the intricate process of transformative and reparative change (Pow, 2021), it is imperative to delve into the multifaceted and rooted historically discourse surrounding the concept of the «gamer girl» (Pow, 2019).

The conventional perception of gameplayers has traditionally been associated with masculinity, disregarding and devaluing the presence of other identities, particularly women. In light of this, it is crucial to emphasize that this study specifically examines the notion of «gamer girl» while encompassing the diverse spectrum of terminologies (Cassell & Jenkins, 2000; Ruberg, 2018; Shaw & Friesem, 2016; Xuejing-Yao *et al.*, 2022). In other words, the research seeks to understand how women are involved in digital video game culture, irrespective of their sexual orientation.

The term «gamer girl» originated as a means to establish the presence of women within a predominantly male-dominated culture (Beavis & Charles, 2007). Its purpose also encompasses the challenges of barriers that influence women's self-perception and how they are perceived by others (Schott & Horrell, 2000). Scholars such as Kafai (2008) and Carr (2007) emphasized the significance of social context for gamer girls, resisting gender stereotypes in gaming cultures. Moreover, Schleiner (2001) noted how this resistance challenges traditional gender roles, leading to gendered online performance (Eklund, 2011).

This apparent social phenomenon, shaped by factors such as gender, race, and sexuality (Shaw, 2011; 2013), inevitably influences the manner in which gamer girls engage and perceive themselves within the realms of digital technology and culture. From an anthropological perspective, Yates and Littleton (1999) stressed that the media sphere plays a pivotal role for girls in the construction of cultural languages that facilitate communication, the exchange of constructive ideas, the formation of values, and the development of identities and relationships.

Exploring the digital realm reveals the framework shaping the perception of «gamer girls». Derogatory terms like «titty streamers» describe those using hypersexualized methods in game streaming (Ruberg *et al.*, 2019). The prevailing context (Beavis & Charles, 2007; Carr, 2007) and recent studies, revolves around «egirls», «girl gamers», or «gamer girls» (Tran, 2022; Xue-

jing-Yao *et al.*, 2022). These notions converge on young gamer girls engaging with technology and the Internet, often facing skepticism and portraying themselves as inauthentic personas within the gaming community (Harrison *et al.*, 2017; Vilasís-Pamos & Pérez-Latorre, 2022).

Several studies posit that young girls use the term «gamer girl» not as a means of self-identification, but rather as a mechanism to signify the prevailing gender stereotypes embedded within the video game culture (Vermeulen *et al.*, 2017; Oates, 2020). These dynamics highlight the imperative for cultural transformations that subvert the main discourse dominated by males and challenge the gender hierarchy within online communities.

1.2. The Grrrl togetherness

The notion of togetherness encapsulates how virtual communities, such as those formed by gamer girls, cultivate a collective narrative through shared experiences and interactions on a platform (Bakardjieva, 2003). This online and social process facilitates the promotion of inclusivity and diversity through innovative modes of communication (Kivijärvi & Katila, 2022).

Comprehending the practices of gamer girls within the gaming community necessitates the establishment of affective connections among younger generations, enabling them to counteract stereotypes by affirming their identities within interpersonal relationships (Lykes, 1985). Affinity groups that advocate egalitarian and inclusive values (Xuejing-Yao *et al.*, 2022) play a pivotal role in fostering and perpetuating such togetherness, thereby facilitating transformative cultural shifts.

A recent study revealed a correlation between social togetherness embodying the grassroots inclinations of present-day gamer girls and the historic «Riot Grrrl» movement (Tulloch *et al.*, 2019). It is worth noting that while our discussion has primarily centered on video game culture thus far (Shaw, 2010), delving into the practices and discourses of gamer girls on digital platforms such as TikTok brings us into the realm of subculture.

In this context, subculture signifies daily praxis that defies conventional cultural norms, fostering distinctive and parallel modes of communication that shape group identity and style (Hebdige, 1979). The «Riot Grrrl» movement serves as an exemplar of a «subculture in revolt» (Hebdige, 1979), establishing an alternative critical space within the subculture. This resonates with the portrayal of gamer girls as inauthentic and hyper-sexualized gameplayers (Harrison *et al.*, 2017; Vilasís-Pamos & Pérez-Latorre, 2022).

The «Riot Grrrl» movement originated in Olympia, Washington State, in the early 1990s following the «Wig Wam Bam» music festival and the establishment of the Strong Women in Music (SWIM) women's coalition

(Jagodzinski, 2015). The significance of the movement lies in its Riot Grrrl Manifesto (1991), in which girls aim to foster a sense of sorority among women and challenge the male-dominated structures of the music industry, embracing feminist, anti-capitalist, and anti-patriarchal ideologies (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The Riot Grrrl Manifesto (1991)

- 1 BECAUSE us girls crave records and books and fanzines that speak to **US** that **WE** feel included in and can understand in our own ways.
- 2 BECAUSE we wanna make it easier for girls to see/hear each other's work so that we can share strategies and criticize-applaud each other.
- 3 BECAUSE we must take over the means of production in order to create our own meanings.
- 4 BECAUSE viewing our work as being connected to our girlfriends-politics-real lives is essential if we are gonna figure out how we are doing impacts, reflects, perpetuates, or **DISRUPTS** the status quo.
- 5 BECAUSE we recognize fantasies of Instant Macho Gun Revolution as impractical lies meant to keep us simply dreaming instead of becoming our dreams **AND THUS seek to create revolution in our own lives every single day by envisioning and creating alternatives to the bullshit christian capitalist way of doing things.**
- 6 BECAUSE we want and need to encourage and be encouraged in the face of all our own insecurities, in the face of beergutboyrock that tells us we can't play our instruments, in the face of "authorities" who say our bands/zines/etc are the worst in the US.
- 7 BECAUSE we don't wanna assimilate to someone else's (boy) standards of what is or isn't.
- 8 BECAUSE we are unwilling to falter under claims that we are reactionary "reverse sexists" **AND NOT THE TRUEPUNKROCKSOULCRUSADERS THAT WE KNOW we really are.**
- 9 BECAUSE we know that life is much more than physical survival and are patently aware that the punk rock "you can do anything" idea is crucial to the coming angry grrrl rock revolution which seeks to save the psychic and cultural lives of girls and women everywhere, according to their own terms, not ours.
- 10 BECAUSE we are interested in creating non-heirarchical ways of being **AND** making music, friends, and scenes based on communication + understanding, instead of competition + good/bad categorizations.
- 11 BECAUSE doing/reading/seeing/hearing cool things that validate and challenge us can help us gain the strength and sense of community that we need in order to figure out how bullshit like racism, able-bodieism, ageism, speciesism, classism, thinism, sexism, anti-semitism and heterosexism figures in our own lives.
- 12 BECAUSE we see fostering and supporting girl scenes and girl artists of all kinds as integral to this process.
- 13 BECAUSE we hate capitalism in all its forms and see our main goal as sharing information and staying alive, instead of making profits of being cool according to traditional standards.
- 14 BECAUSE we are angry at a society that tells us Girl = Dumb, Girl = Bad, Girl = Weak.
- 15 BECAUSE we are unwilling to let our real and valid anger be diffused and/or turned against us via the internalization of sexism as witnessed in girl/girl jealousy and self defeating girltype behaviors.
- 16 BECAUSE I believe with my wholeheartmindbody that girls constitute a revolutionary soul force that can, and will change the world for real.

Source: Adapted by the author.

What truly set this subcultural and activist movement apart was its association with music, particularly the punk rock genre through which girls sought to inspire new communities by addressing sexism, gender-based violence, and related gender issues (Marcus, 2010). This study focuses on a media-centric context that cannot disregard the feminist lens employed by the Riot Grrrl movement when analyzing the experiences of gamer girls.

Thus, given the existing literature on gamer girls and the «Riot Grrrl» subculture (Tulloch *et al.*, 2019), it is crucial to understand how present-day cohorts of girls use popular digital platforms such as TikTok to collectively challenge entrenched stereotypes.

2. Methodology and objectives

The main objective of this study was to examine the performative practices of girls who employ the #GamerGirl hashtag on TikTok to assert their presence and significance within video game culture. To accomplish this overarching goal, two specific objectives were delineated:

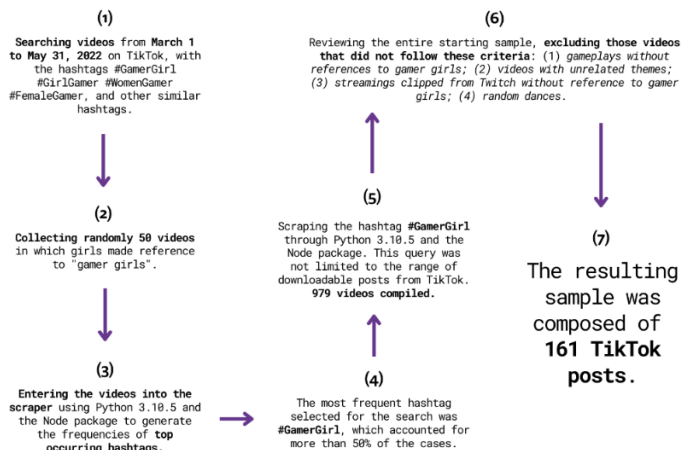
- Objective 1 (O1): Delving into the discourse surrounding gender stereotypes directed at gamer girls on TikTok.
- Objective 2 (O2): Exploring the performative roles adopted by gamer girls on TikTok.

Grounded Theory was used as the primary methodology, complemented by qualitative content analysis to enrich data observations. Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2017) is a qualitative research approach that emphasizes theory development derived from empirical data. Through iterative and systematic analyses, it facilitates the emergence of theoretical insights, fostering a comprehensive understanding of social phenomena.

On the other hand, qualitative content analysis, which is understood as textual, visual, discourse, audio, or other data (Saldaña, 2013), served as a tool to examine the patterns within 161 #GamerGirl posts. This technique involves systematic coding and categorizing of content to identify recurrent themes, motifs, and underlying meanings.

2.1. Data collection and sample

To select the data for this study, I conducted a data scraping process on TikTok using Python 3.10.5, and a Node package, resulting in an initial dataset of 979 posts. I followed the steps presented in Figure 2 to filter the videos related to the research focus (i.e., «gamer girls»), resulting in 161 posts.

Figure 2. Sample selection stages

Source: Created by the author.

2.2. The codebook for data analysis

Data were examined using the qualitative analysis software Atlas.ti 22. The codebook incorporates observable codes tailored to address the study objectives (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Codebook adapted from de Castell and Skardzius (2019)

CATEGORIES	CODE	WHEN TO USE IT
 Critical perspective Affective dimensions of the profiles of women who play video games, with an interest in critical discourses.	Sexism Harassment Stereotyping Misogyny Inequality/inequity	Identifying discourses that cite, perform, portray, criticize, describe, or suggest behaviors of abuse of power, sexism, or harassment against female gamers.
 Love and/or passion Affective dimensions of the profiles of female gamers, with interest in their relationship with other gamers and the video game industry.	Video games Encouraging or supportive Community	Identifying discourses that cite, perform, portray, satirize, describe or suggest behaviors of support, empowerment and feelings of grouping among female gamers.
 Themes	Main topic	Identifying the performative roles that construct the "gamer girl" discourse.

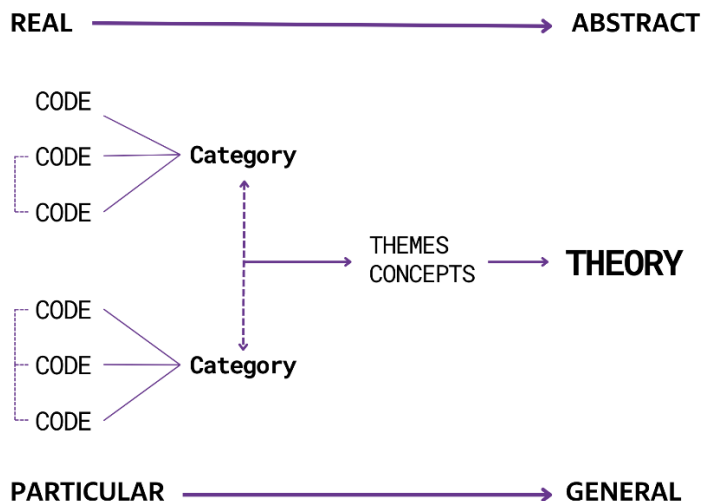
Source: Created by the author.

Specifically, for O1, codes were adapted from the «critical perspective» of women and «mentions of love and/or passion» within the video game sphere (Castell & Skardzius, 2019). These codes were selected because of their relevance in analyzing the discourse of TikTok users, particularly in terms of their self-perception and expression of affiliation with gaming culture. This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of the data, drawing parallel with the assertions made by the Riot Grrrl Manifesto (1991).

For O2, the «themes» code was utilized to identify performative roles contributing to the construction of a «Grrrl togetherness» sensibility. This involved identifying recurring themes and patterns within the data that spoke to the collective sorority and shared identities among users. This facilitated qualitative content analysis (Saldaña, 2013).

As observed in Figure 4, TikTok posts were analyzed through annotations based on predefined codes, generating categorical observations aimed at identifying concepts, discourses, themes, or patterns, ultimately defining a theoretical-phenomenological approach, as exemplified by the «Gamer Grrrl».

Figure 4. Data analysis procedure in Atlas.ti 22



Source: Adapted by the author from Saldaña (2013).

2.3. Ethical considerations

The data processing approach was informed by the rationale of TikTokers, who belong to an average cohort that may have ambitions to attain online

fame (Abidin, 2016). In light of this study's exploration of contentious gender and stereotype topics and the random and extensive collection of posts, I took on the responsibility of anonymizing the content. Following Markham's (2012) suggestion for analyzing ambiguous online data, I utilized Adobe Photoshop CC (version 23.5) to apply pixelation to user faces and conceal distinctive elements of TikTok such as usernames and profile pictures.

3. Discussion

3.1. (O1.a) The critical #GamerGirl perspective dimension: Stereotypes amidst mockery

Gamer girls face objectification and stereotypes in gaming culture but use satire as shared resistance against masculine discourse. Their ludic and ironic performances express unique perspectives beyond gender stereotyping as a strategic means of navigating the online gaming environment (Eklund, 2011).

3.1.1. Sexist expectations: Dumb rewards

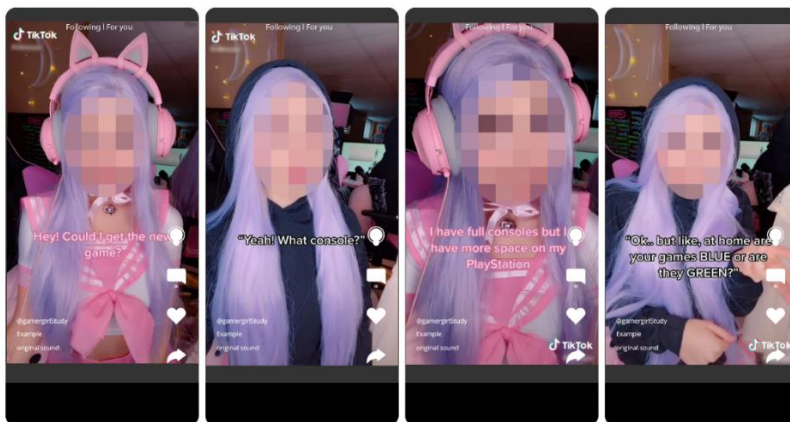
To analyze gender-based discrimination in the gaming community, I used the «sexism» code introduced by de Castell and Skardzius (2019). This code revealed five gender assumptions: (1) «the dumb girl», where males assume girls to be ignorant about video games; (2) «the girl as an object», where someone vie for the attention of a vulnerable, sexualized, and cute girl; (3) «the girl who gets everything she wants just for being a girl», where girls receive rewards in video games solely because of their gender; (4) «the hypersexualized girl», which refers to the idealized girl representation of characters in video games; and (5) «the woman who must be saved», i.e., defended and supported by others.

Through iterative analysis of TikTok performances, I observed that the «gamer girl» was often portrayed in a submissive and self-deprecating manner (Vilasís-Pamos & Pires, 2022), with performers ironically reinforcing their ineptitude in video games. Notably, this behavior was not directed towards other girls, but instead served to denigrate outsider girl groups (Austin, 2022).

As an illustration, Figure 5 provides an example of the stereotypical portrayal of the «dumb gamer girl». This instance elucidates the fourteenth statement from Riot Grrrl Manifesto (1991), wherein individuals voiced their weariness regarding the portrayal of girls as dumb, bad, or weak. Similarly, users express their dissatisfaction with recurrent performances in which their gender leads others to presuppose their lack of video game expertise. Additionally, the seventh statement of the Riot Grrrl Manifesto emphasized the

refusal to conform to external discourses and standards. In this scenario, users adopt an exaggerated and ironic persona to underscore the gender-based expectations placed upon them.

Figure 5. L-R: (5.1 and 5.3) «Gamer girl» looking for a PlayStation game in a store; (5.2 and 5.4) «Cashier guy» helping the girl as if she were dumb



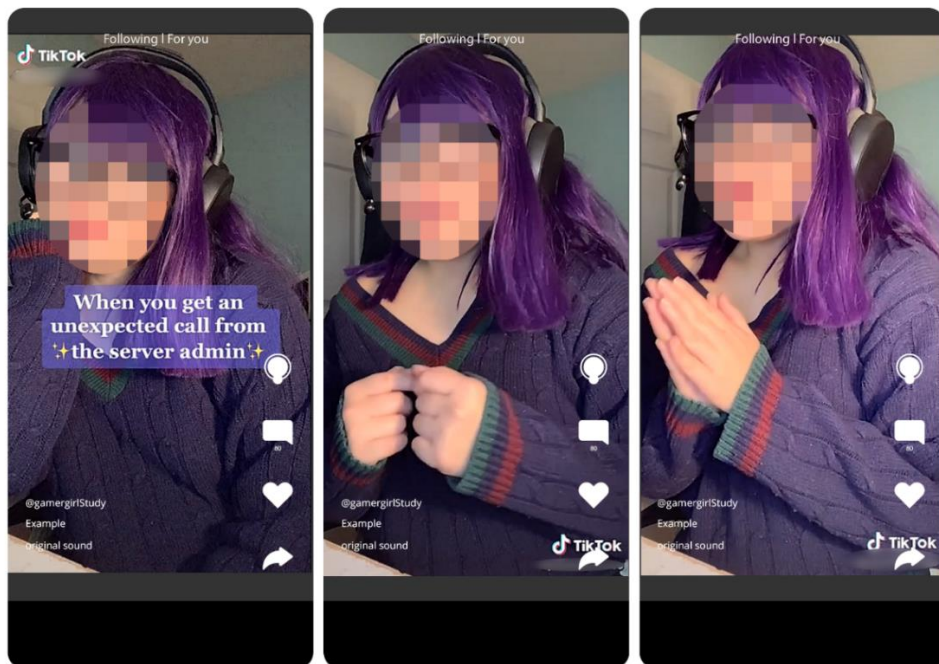
Script of the "dumb gamer girl" audio. GG: Hey! Could I get the new game? / CG: Yeah! What console? / GG: Oh, uhm... PlayStation. / CG: Okay, but like, are you sure? / GG: I have both consoles but I have more space on my PlayStation. / CG: Okay, but like, at home, like, are your games blue or are they green? / GG: PlayStation. / CG: Okay, but like, blue or green? / GG: "sigh and uses a higher pitched tone of voice" OHMYGAWD yeah, like, all my other games at home are definitely blue. I'll take a blue one! "makes a displeased gesture". GG: Gamer Girl. CG: Cashier guy.

Source: TikTok screenshots and script anonymized by the author.

3.1.2. Harassment: Girls as a loot box

The code «harassment» refers to actions that involve pressuring a girl for romantic or sexual purposes, creating uncomfortable situations. This code resulted in four performances: (1) «flirting», when someone persistently tries to pick up a gamer girl who evades or refuses her/him; (2) «reverse flirting», where someone demonstrates how girls feel when they receive continuous compliments despite begging the other person to stop; (3) «gender denigration», where derogatory comments are made about girls solely because of their gender; and (4) the «girl loot box» (as shown in Figure 4), which involves targeting a girl to obtain sexual gratification, such as pictures or videos, in exchange for buying video game items, skins, and other related content.

Across all the performances analyzed, gamer girls were frequently portrayed as objects to be sexualized in exchange for rewards. On TikTok, gamer girls often depicted themselves as «loot boxes», a virtual item in the gaming culture and in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) that provide random rewards during gameplay, including customization items for avatars.

Figure 6. Discord chat of a «loot box girl» with someone

Script of the “loot box girl” audio. GG: oh s***, I'm getting a call. / *Clears throat* / UWU hello? Oh, Sorry it took me so long to reply, I was just taking a drink. / Oh, do you want me to send you a picture of myself? / Oh, uhm... I'm sorry, I can't send you it right now. / I promise I'll send it to you tomorrow. / All right... in exchange, can you please transfer me money via Discord? / Ok, see you tomorrow. / UWU, goodbye. / Oh, is exhausting, bro.
GG: Gamer Girl.

Source: TikTok screenshots and script anonymized by the author.

In Figure 6, the gamer engages in conversation with another gamer. Initially, she appears relaxed, but she is called «unexpected» by the server administrator through a hypothetical instant messaging service platform. Although we do not hear the voice of the other, the performer's responses suggest that he/she is soliciting pictures of her in exchange for transferring money. As in the previous example, the girl expresses exhaustion with the role she is performing, indicating that this practice is unnatural.

By associating themselves with the concept of loot boxes, users symbolized the commodification and objectification they often experienced within the gaming community. The loot box serves as a metaphorical representation of the transactional nature of their portrayal, where their sexuality and physical appearance become sought-after.

Moreover, this analogy highlights the random nature of rewards gamer girls may receive. Just as loot boxes in games provide unpredictable items or benefits, the rewards obtained by gamer girls in the form of cash or items may vary greatly and are often contingent upon the degree of sexualization involved. This aspect further underscores the complex dynamics between gender, representation, and reward systems within the gaming culture.

In this context, it is important to acknowledge that loot box dynamics are not limited to the objectification and sexualization of gamer girls. There is a reciprocal dynamic in which gamer girls also engage in leveraging other users as loot boxes. By offering photographs or videos showcasing their appearance, gameplayers receive in-game gifts or virtual items.

This practice introduces a dual moral dimension to this phenomenon. On the one hand, it highlights the power dynamics and objectification experienced by gamer girls as they navigate a gaming culture that often rewards their sexualized presence. On the other hand, it raises questions about the ethics and implications of engaging in such exchanges as it perpetuates a transactional model in which personal appearance becomes a currency for in-game rewards.

3.1.3. Stereotypes: Girl prejudices in video games

During the analysis, the «stereotype» code emerged, illustrating the diverse portrayals of gamer girls within the gaming community. The most recurrent stereotype was (1) the «inauthentic gamer girl», who is perceived as engaging in video games primarily for attention rather than genuine interest. This stereotype is reinforced by the concept of the «true gamer» (Paaßen *et al.*, 2017), asserting that gamer girls with an extensive collection of gaming merchandise are deemed «pretenders» rather than authentic gamers.

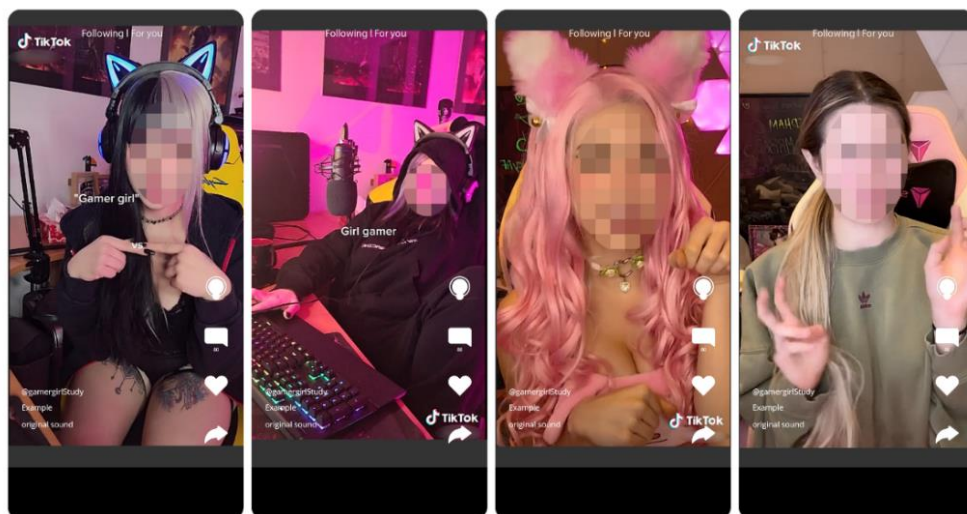
In response to this stereotype, users employed irony to emphasize that their gaming experience should not be defined by the quantity of merchandise they possess. For instance, a post featured a mockingly high-pitched voice stating, «I'm a fake gamer. I spend thousands of dollars on video games, my Nintendo 3DS, my Nintendo Switch, my gaming PC, my PlayStation 4, and my Xbox One—all for the attention of men». This exaggerated voice highlights the absurdity of associating one's identity as a gamer solely with the ownership of merchandise.

The posts also exhibited other closely related stereotypes, including the (2) «maid girl» and the (3) «seductive girl». The former performs the role of satisfying men's desires by playing «healer» or «supporter» roles, bringing cookies that recover the characters' life, among other actions. Meanwhile, the latter manipulates men's feelings, conforming to the traditional gender roles

of a «good» or «bad» woman as a capable student with a respectable job, capable of managing family responsibilities, and typically found in the kitchen (Jennings, 2013). These performances combine mockery with the *femme fatale* persona, as girls leverage the male interest in their gender to their advantage.

In addition to the previously discussed stereotypes, other performances centered on the portrayal of (un)skilled «gamer girls». As Harrison *et al.* (2017) noted, the prevalent sexualization of girls in the video game industry has contributed to the widespread belief that they lack the ability to play professionally and skillfully. This belief was reflected in different posts, which depicted (4) the «girl who requires support» from an expert male gamer player because she was not skilled enough to succeed, as well as (5) the «skilled woman», who is portrayed as competitive and successful. However, the most commonly enacted stereotype was (6) the «perception versus reality» of what a gamer girl looks like (Figure 7).

Figure 7. L-R: (7.1 and 7.3) Assumed «gamer girl» according to the collective imaginary; (7.2 and 7.3) The true girl gamer



Script of the gamer girl vs. girl gamer audio. *Gamer Girl:* Oh no, I dropped my Xbox controller. I hope no one claps my cheeks when I pick it up. / *Girl gamer:* "burp".

Source: TikTok screenshots and script anonymized by the author.

Data revealed a final stereotype regarding the appearance of «gamer girls», which suggested that the (7) «true girl gamer is fat and ugly». It reflects the discrepancy between the beauty standards set by the video game industry and

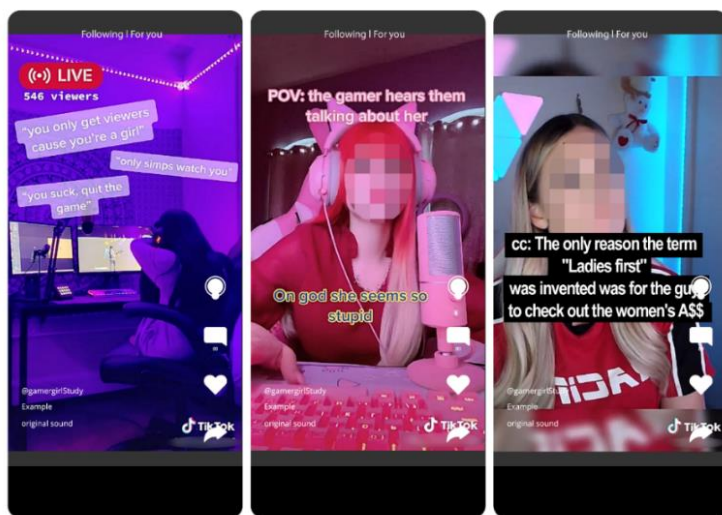
the image of competitive and skilled gamer girls. This means that girls who conform to the notion of a «true gamer girl» are less likely to fit these beauty standards. One audio meme joyfully proclaimed that «All gamer girls are ugly or fat. B***, I'm both. Double gamer girl!». These posts highlighted their «true gamer side», which was characterized by rudeness, competitiveness, skillfulness, and empowerment.

The users challenged «gamer girl» stereotypes, aligning with the Riot Grrrl Manifesto's rejection of «reverse sexism». They advocated for inclusivity and asserted that gender should not hinder recognition as a gamer. They deliberately depicted and questioned their role attributed to them in gaming encounters.

3.1.4. Misogyny: Free hostile communication

The performances also frequently featured «misogyny», which is closely related to feelings of hatred, repudiation, and aversion towards girls. In exploring this concept, three patterns of misogynistic behavior emerged in the performances (Figure 8): (1) insults directed towards girls because of their gender; (2) group mockery directed towards girls in cooperative games; and (3) misogynistic jokes about girls shared openly during gameplay.

Figure 8. L-R: (8.1) Insults; (8.2) Male group mockery; (8.3) Misogynist joke



Source: TikTok screenshots and script anonymized by the author.

In Figure 8.2, user share experiences in which groups insulted her in a foreign language, assuming she would not understand. These posts also illustrate how girls are often seen as outsiders, making them a minority harassment target. Despite this, the gamer responded with anger, sadness, or courage towards attacks on their gender. Other girls shared their experiences and expressed support, validating their togetherness as person-in-relationships (Lykes, 1985).

3.1.5. Inequality/inequity: Gender gaps and exclusion

Analysis of the videos revealed instances of «inequality/inequity» regarding gender within the gaming culture. Two forms of this code emerged: (1) the belief that video games are not suitable for girls, promoting feminine and supportive roles, as seen when a gamer girl questioned her ability to play due to societal expectations; and (2) the unequal treatment of girls compared to others.

These experiences align with Riot Grrrl sensibility, motivating participation in the #GamerGirl trend. Through their performances, young girls emphasized the structural inequalities present in gaming, protesting against gender-based exclusion, and asserting their identity as gamers, free from gender-based judgment (see the first statement of Riot Grrrl Manifesto in Figure 1).

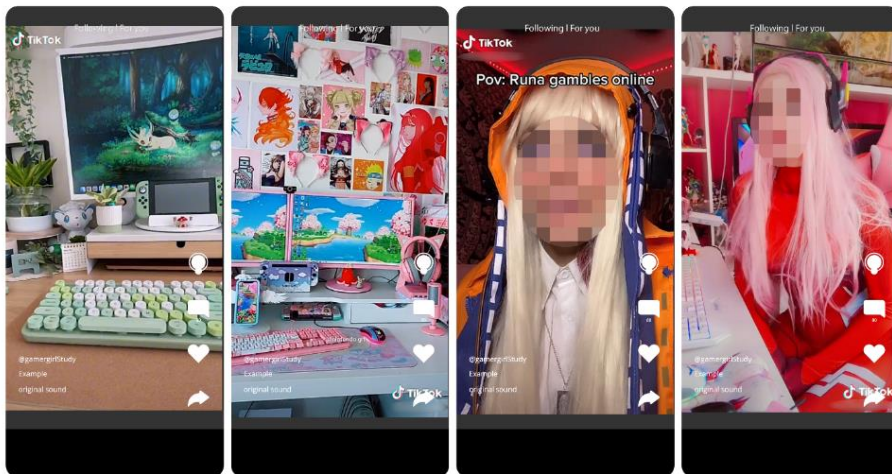
3.2. (O1.b) The #GamerGirl passion dimension: Sorority and gaming love

The dimension of «love and/or passion» for the gaming culture showed a collaborative and emotionally connected community. The following examples illustrate how gamer girls express their affective ties with others.

3.2.1. Loving set up, merchandising, and cosplay

The «video games» code pertains to the emotional aspects of passion and love experienced by girls within the video game industry. Specifically, I identified video-meme trends (Zulli & Zulli, 2020) that relate to (a) «set up and merchandising», and (b) «cosplay performances», which typically feature fictional characters from manga and anime (Japanese comics and animated productions) (Figure 9). This content showcases the softer and more affectionate side of gamer girls, as they share what brings them joy regardless of societal expectations. However, this trend has also fueled the gamer community's stereotype of the «fake gamer girl» (Vilasís-Pamos & Pérez-Latorre, 2022).

Figure 9. L-R: (9.1 and 9.2) Set up tour; (9.3 and 9.4) Cosplay performances from «Kakegurui» and «Darling in the Franxx» anime



Source: TikTok screenshots and script anonymized by the author.

3.2.2. Encouraging and supportive girls

The code «encouraging or supportive» refers to behaviors and performances that foster a sense of sisterhood within the gaming community. Users conveyed discourses resonating with the principles articulated in the Riot manifesto. In their sixth statement, Riot Grrrl emphasized their intention and necessity to «encourage and be encouraged in the face of all our own insecurities» (Riot Grrrl Manifesto, 1991).

This discourse was conducted using music (Figure 10). Through the original songs, they celebrated their identity as true gamers regardless of gender and advocated for collaboration and inclusivity within the gaming community, promoting a harmonious gaming experience.

Users engaged in the practice of «teaching and learning with #GamerGirls» where they shared strategies on capitalizing on sexism by adopting a persona of a «sweet and cute gamer girl» to generate income. These performances demonstrated Grrrl sensibility, in which girls collaborated to challenge stereotypes and foster a sense of unity. This aligns with the manifesto's eleventh and twelfth statements, promoting the formation of a collective identity akin to the Riot Grrrl movement dedicated to combating sexism through inter-girl community support.

Figure 10. L-R: (10.1) The #GamerGirl rap; (10.2) The #GamerGirl song

 The #GamerGirl rap Yeah I'm a girl, why does it matter to you? I've been playing this game for years trust me I'm not new hmm what was that? you want me to be quiet? sorry I'm hitting my headshots, maybe you should try it "Team mates! This girl is being mean! 🙄" OMG I forgot... I'm babysitting a TEEN What was that? Go back to the kitchen? Oh I will once you play and quit you b**ch'n	 The #GamerGirl song Yes I'm a girl gamer Playing games is what I do Being a girl means lots of hate directed right at you One look at my set up "She's a fake" is what they think Sorry that is not the case Just cause my set up's pink So what if I'm not diamond? I play games just for fun. Not all gamers in the world need to be number one Let's stop spreading hate, we want to have fun too Maybe if you're nice to me I'll play some games with you!
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Source: Created by the author.

3.2.3. Healthy and toxic relationships in the gaming arena

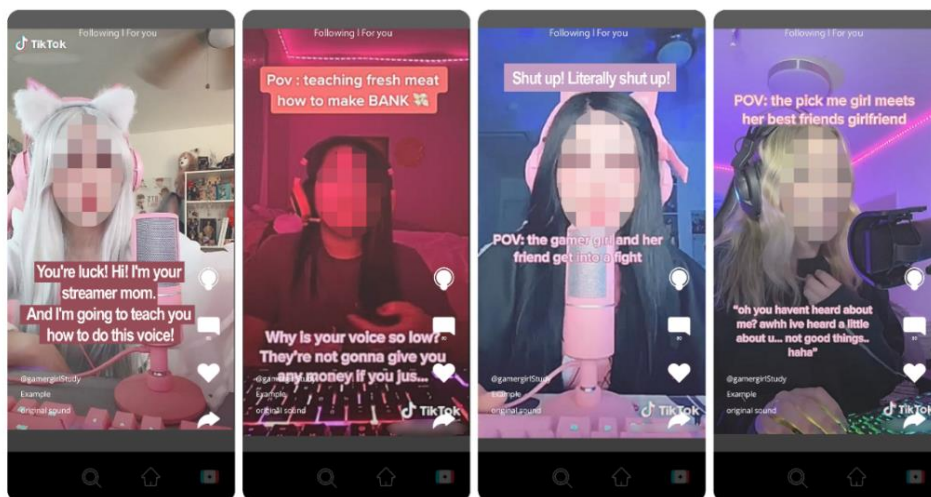
The analysis revealed two primary relationship patterns that contributed to the strength of the «Grrrl gamer» community. The first pattern, referred to as (a) «healthy relationships», portrays positive interactions among gamer girls, as seen in the previous section. For instance, in Figure 11.1 and 11.2, a girl explains to another how she can adjust her voice to «make money».

The second pattern, denoted as (b) «toxic relationships», illustrates the emergence of conflicts among girls within the gaming community, as they vie for attention and engage in critiques of each other's authenticity. As depicted in Figure 11.3 and 11.4, instances arise where one girl accuses another of embodying the traits of a «fake girl» or a «pick me girl». These exchanges serve as performative acts aimed at validating or condemning different manifestations of the «gamer girl» identity, thereby offering ironic commentary on the pervasive influence of the «toxic gaming culture» (Consalvo, 2012).

Moreover, the development of toxic gaming culture over the years has led to discord among girls. This culture, characterized by heteronormative social norms and behaviors (Shaw, 2010), perpetuates an environment in which competition and criticism thrive, impeding the formation of a support-

ive and inclusive community. Consequently, girls within the gaming sphere are compelled to navigate through these adversarial dynamics, sometimes resulting in instances of rivalry and doubt that further contribute to the fragmentation of their collective experiences. For instance, a dispute between two girls over spending time or playing games with their boyfriends/best friends highlights this toxic performance (Figure 11.4).

Figure 11. L-R: (11.1 and 11.2) Healthy relationships; (11.3 and 11.4) Toxic relationships



Script of a "toxic relationship" audio. GG: Hey Alex! Do yo- Wait, who just said that? / Hi, what's your name? Emma, That's so cute omg... How do know Alex? / Oh, you're his best friend? Haha okay, what's funny? Oh, I'm his gf... of 6 months. / Oh you haven't heard about me? Awhh I've heard a little about u... not good things... haha. / Um, anyways. What game are you guys playing... um okay. You're his #1 on snap? Okay. / U should... recheck the list... I've been his #1 on snap since we started dating. / So, anyways ummm... I'm allowed to be here. It's public, this is my server, and you're talking to my bf... / So, anyways... Alex do u wanna hang out in like 10-15 minutes?. GG: Gamer Girl.

Source: TikTok screenshots and script anonymized by the author.

3.3. (O2) The #GamerGrrrl constituting togetherness

Drawing from the previous performances, various stereotypical identities of the gamer girl on TikTok became apparent. These roles exhibit an affective tie to the gender stereotypes prevalent in the gaming community and create a supportive network that challenges male discourse. These highly stereotyped roles (Figure 12) rely on satire, irony, and self-deprecating humor, which neutralizes negative information about oneself and is popular among the younger generations.

The «gamer girl» defined by Yim *et al.* (2023) as an adolescent or young adult who frequently play video games, interact with other gamers, follow industry and platform trends, and build local or international groups was the

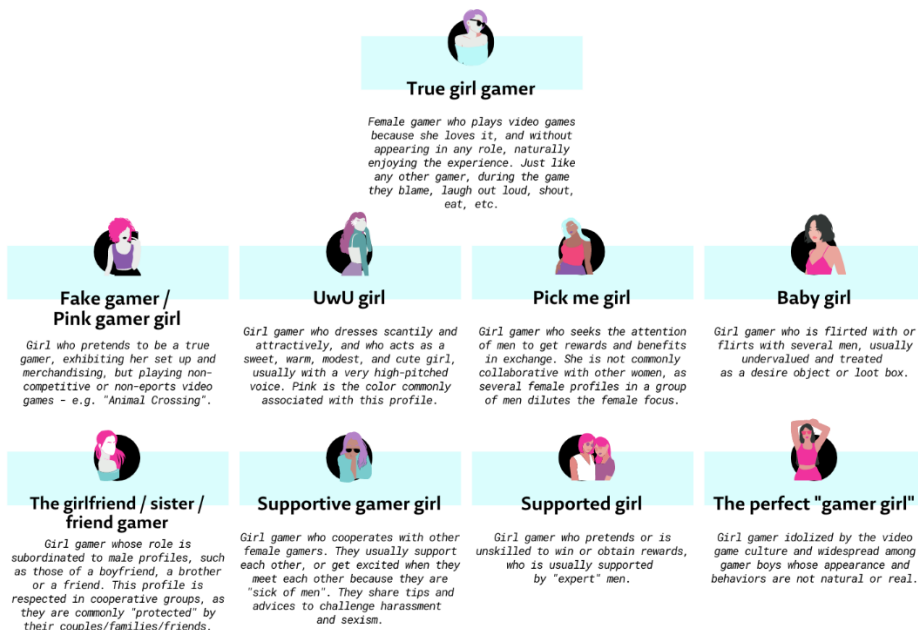
leading role in the #GamerGirl challenge. The trend involved portraying various role plays that seem to constitute a new «subculture in revolt» (Hebdige, 1979). Understanding the diverse identities represented by users concerning gamer girls on the platform is important for several reasons.

First, it sheds light on how stereotypical roles are constructed and perpetuated, reflecting gender stereotypes prevalent in the gaming community. Second, by analyzing these roles, we gain insights into the affective connections that individuals have with these stereotypes and how they form a supportive network that challenges the dominant discourse within gaming. Third, by examining the highly stereotyped roles and employment of satire, irony, and self-deprecating humor, we can observe how negative information about oneself is neutralized, which is particularly popular among the younger generations. Thus, an examination of these identities provides valuable insights into the tactics employed by TikTokers to subvert and navigate societal gender expectations in the gaming domain.

Several roles that appeared explicitly in the captions of posts on TikTok were identified, with text superimposed on videos or audio scripts (Figure 12). For example, «fake gamers» or «pink gamer girls» were associated with the exhibition of setups and merchandising. The «UwU girls» were featured in the performances of the «loot box girl», who played a role in high-pitched voices and infantilized behaviors. Similarly, «Pick me girls», «Baby girls» and «Girlfriend/sister/friend gamer» emerged in healthy and toxic discussions, where TikTokers attempted to show the relationships between gamers.

The analysis also showed distinct roles of gamer girls such as «supportive gamer girls», who engaged in collaborative learning experiences within a sorority-like environment; «supported girls», who were objectified in flirtatious interactions, emphasizing men's masculinity and gaming prowess; and the «perfect gamer girl», a satirical portrayal that highlighted the industry's long-standing idealization of culturally stereotypical traits such as cuteness, sweetness, sexiness, weakness, and lack of skill.

In Riot Grrrl Manifesto (1991), the tenth statement emphasizes the movement's aim of rejecting hierarchical processes in both personal and musical relationships. Their approach centers on communication and understanding rather than competition or the categorization of individuals as «good» or «bad» girls. This commitment to alternative modes of interaction aligns with the principles of group communication based on lived experiences (Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin, 2022) and the recognition of historical expectations and biases that have burdened gamer girls (Shaw, 2011; 2013).

Figure 12. The #GamerGirl performative roles on TikTok

Source: Created by the author.

It is worth noting that the unique affordances provided by TikTok facilitate this communication, going beyond the mere construction of a manifesto. The new generation of gamer girls who actively participate in social media platforms gives rise to a new subcultural online language (Yates & Littleton, 1999) characterized by constructive exchange of ideas, the framing of values, the development of authentic identities, and a sense of togetherness. The mode in which gamer girls, akin to the Riot Grrrl movement of the past, express a collective identity reveals the emergence of a novel and assertive subculture within the gaming community in a specific platform time and space context (Nooney, 2013). Instead of solely identifying themselves as gamer girls (Vermeulen *et al.*, 2017), contemporary cohorts of girls utilize TikTok to engage in the active creation, recreation, and reparation (Pow, 2019) of stereotypical narratives concerning gender within the video game industry.

4. Conclusions, limitations and future research

The present study explores the critical girl perspective extended by TikTok users in response to the hegemonic male discourse inherent in the online video game culture. Drawing on the unique affordances of the platform,

#GamerGirls employ mockery, irony, and satire to challenge preexisting gender stereotypes.

Unlike insults and denigrations, TikTok users caricature the stereotypical roles of a presumed gamer girl to combat sexism, harassment, and misogyny, building a «gamer Grrrl togetherness» subculture based on a ludic sorority. As the movement continues to gain traction and grow in popularity, it has become increasingly clear that the perspectives of young gamer girls cannot be ignored. This is particularly true in light of recent controversies surrounding sexism and harassment within the gaming community, which have brought issues of gender inequality to the forefront of the public discourse.

The first objective of the study was to delve into the discourse related to gamer girl stereotypes in gaming culture, revealing multiple practices, prejudices, and behaviors that represent some of the statements of the Riot Grrrl manifesto. The trend inspired by TikTok's creative affordances further fuels this movement, indicating a new and younger generation of gamer girls. The #GamerGrrrl movement has served as a catalyst for broader discussions on representation and diversity in gaming. By challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes, the movement has helped to create a more inclusive and welcoming gaming culture that embraces a wider range of perspectives and experiences. This has not only been beneficial for gamer girls, but also for the industry as a whole, as it has opened up new creative avenues and led to the development of more diverse and innovative game discourses.

The second objective was to analyze the roles played by gamer girls on TikTok to construct a Grrrl togetherness sensibility. The use of this platform for the movement emphasizes the important role that social media can play in shaping public discourse and promoting social change. As a highly visual and interactive medium, the app provides a unique opportunity for users to express themselves creatively and to connect with others who share their interests and values. This has allowed girls to come together and build a supportive and empowering community that challenges traditional gender norms and promotes gender equality.

The study identified up to nine stereotyped roles, including the «true gamer girl», «fake gamer», «UwU girl», «Pick me girl», «Baby girl», «The girl-friend/sister/friend gamer», «supportive gamer girl», «supported girl», and «the perfect gamer girl». These roles served as moods that allowed girls to parody, re-signify, and have fun. Identities, performances, and collective imaginaries often turned into video and audio memes, transformed prejudice into jokes, subordination into profit, and mockery into sorority.

Understanding these roles and the motivations behind their adoption provides valuable insights into the complexities of identity formation and negotiation within the gaming community. It underscores the ways in which individuals on TikTok utilize performance and creativity to navigate and challenge traditional gender expectations and sheds light on the impact of broader cultural influences, such as toxic gaming cultures, on the experiences and interactions of gamer girls.

The study found that the delegitimization of gamer girls is dissolved in a discourse based on a «ludic caricaturization». This serves as a means of resistance against marginalization and the negative portrayal of gamer girls within online gaming communities. By leveraging humor and satire, individuals can reshape the discourse surrounding gamer girls and foster a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of their experiences. Through playful exaggeration and subversion of these stereotypes, gamer girls reclaim agency and create a space for critical reflection and dialogue. They engage in artistic expression that exposes the absurdity and inherent biases of gendered expectations.

Additionally, these performances foster a sense of creative liberation, challenge the *status quo*, and promote a healthy and empowering online space for all gamers. The TikTok gamer girls strive to achieve a resolute Grrrl statement through their engagement in this digital movement: «neither true, nor fake, nor UwU, nor pick me, nor baby, nor sister, nor girlfriend, nor supported, nor perfect. Just and because US».

This study raises questions that require further research in the future. To develop a more comprehensive understanding of gamer girls' subcultures, future studies should venture beyond Western cultural contexts. Examining cultural variations in gaming gender stereotypes will provide valuable insights into how the subculture of gamer girls manifests, evolves, and resists stereotyped discourses in diverse online settings. By exploring different regions, researchers can uncover the nuanced interplay between cultural norms, social expectations, and the construction of the gamer's Grrrl togetherness.

Intersectionality also plays a crucial role in shaping gamer girls' experiences. Future studies should explore how race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and other identities interact with gender to influence the formation and expression of the subculture of gamers. Understanding these dynamics is vital for creating an inclusive and healthy gaming environment for the new generations.

Finally, examining the opportunities and challenges posed by technology will help to identify strategies for leveraging these platforms to promote

social change, playful sociality, and challenge sexism within the gaming community. The role of social media platforms such as TikTok in shaping the subculture of gamer girls merits further investigation.

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