Virtually Masculine: Queer Men’s Experiences With Harassment in Online Video Games

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Video games have become a popular way for people to spend their leisure time. As video games become pervasive within our culture and people’s everyday lives, it is imperative to understand how offline inequalities are translated into online spaces. The Entertainment Software Association (2021) estimated that in the United States, 67% of adults and 76% of those under 18 years old play video games, with 226.6 million players total. Moreover, these are not all solitary players; there is a large audience for professional play, with 140 million active monthly members on Twitch—a popular video game live-streaming service—with over 1.86 billion hours of content viewed monthly (Backlinko, 2021). This popularity has led to professional e-sports teams, which resemble professional sports teams in branding and value. Team SoloMid, the highest valued e-sports team, is appraised at an estimated $410 million, which rivals the median worth of a National Hockey League team at $520 million (World Economic Forum, 2021). The increasing reach and relevance of video games makes it necessary to understand how harassment occurs differently within these online spaces. Thus far, scholars have focused on harassment of women and people of color within these spaces, but I expand upon these studies to include dimensions of gender and queerness. Understanding harassment in online video games can also help us understand how harassment happens in other digital spaces, which is increasingly relevant because our constant technological advancement leads to human interaction frequently being mediated by technology.

Video games are an important cultural space for social scientists because they defy simplistic binary classifications. They are both work and leisure, physical and mental, embodied and intangible, played with others, and played in the privacy of homes, and reflect our offline social world but are set in fictional worlds. Competition in video games is often anonymous, allowing players to release their social inhibitions when interacting with other gamers. Behavior that is now unimaginable or at least highly sanctioned in offline sports, such as using racist or homophobic slurs, lacks accountability in digital settings, allowing covert beliefs, and practices to become overt within player communication.

While women continue to experience sexism and reduced opportunities in sports, Gamergate garnered worldwide attention of the sexism present in video games. Gamergate was a harassment campaign in 2014 that targeted feminist game critics, developers, and scholars, resulting in widespread attacks against many of the prominent women in video games (Dockterman, 2014; Saltzer, 2018). Gamergate brought online sexism into popular discussion and interdisciplinary scholarship, but attention to harassment of women in online spaces was short-lived. Few scholars continued to analyze power online and even fewer have focused on race, sexuality, gender expression, or harassment experienced by men. This article highlights the importance of an intersectional approach to researching video games by analyzing the multiple dimensions of harassments that men may experience. I contribute to game and sport literature on masculinity, sexuality, and race by asking, “Do queer men experience gender, race, and sexuality harassment in online video games?” and if so, “How frequently does this harassment occur and how is it different from offline spaces?”

Video games are an opportune venue for studying gender dynamics because they allow researchers to see people’s interactions when bodies are necessary but not displayed to others. In online video games, the gender of others is unknown and because our gendered bodies are not visible, gender display is voluntary and only apparent through our actions/voices. Video games are a masculinized space, so when players do not reveal their gender, they are presumed to be men by default (Kowert et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2008). Understanding how harassment occurs between men online, and particularly in relation to gamers’ presumed identities, can advance our understanding of inequality in online interactions and can make overt aspects of inequality that occurs covertly offline. As we become increasingly dependent on technology, understanding how the internet and anonymity shape harassment becomes increasingly pertinent because harassment can limit or create barriers to participation in video games (Cote, 2017). This article makes three main points: First, that nerd masculinity structures the ideals of online video games into what I call hegemonic nerd masculinity. Second, because bodies are not visible in online video games, hegemonic nerd masculinity uses symbolic harassment to establish certain bodies and masculinities as subordinate. And third, that players experience more frequent
and intersecting harassment based on how much they vary from hegemonic nerd masculinity.

Video games are associated with geek masculinity which is subordinated in offline spaces. However, men labeled geeks can embrace technological expertise to provide an alternative but diminished pathway to masculine achievement (Kowert et al., 2014; Salter, 2018). While subordinated offline, I argue that the negative connotation of geek in offline spaces is valorized into “nerd” within online spaces and especially online video games. This marginalized masculinity offline can redefine itself online and develops into a protest masculinity, which I call “nerd masculinity.” I use nerd masculinity because many participants defined themselves as nerds and discussed their involvement within a greater nerd culture, giving the traditionally negative term a positive reclaimed definition. Within online spaces, this nerd masculinity becomes the dominant masculinity and is reformed and reinforced into hegemonic nerd masculinity. This nerd masculinity is characterized by whiteness, heterosexuality, masculinity, and technological prowess. But in these online spaces, players’ gender, race, and sexuality are not readily apparent, so players are assumed to fit nerd masculinity norms until they intentionally or unintentionally divulge information that associates them with a subordinated category. In online video games, hegemonic nerd masculinity is perpetuated through a special type of symbolic violence that I call symbolic harassment. Symbolic harassment utilizes Bourdieu’s symbolic violence but grounds it within the abstraction of bodies and audiences in online video games. Symbolic violence is a nonphysical violence which manifests in the frictions of unequal power between social groups (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In video games, players use symbolic harassment—abstract harassment directed at groups that are subordinated within hegemonic masculinity, even when they do not know or believe that these bodies are present—to critique other players or events in the game. This functions as an overt process of differentiating gender, race, sexuality, and ability, among others, through the explicit and public disparaging of marginalized groups.

**Theoretical Framework**

**Masculinity**

This study aims to advance understandings of online harassment by addressing how queer men experience gender, sexuality, and racial/ethnic harassment. To do this, I use Raewyn Connell’s (2005, p. 77) concept of hegemonic masculinity, “the configuration of gender practices which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.” Hegemonic masculinity subordinates women and racialized or feminized masculinities (Connell, 2005). Queer men are associated with femininity by what Peter Hennen (2008) calls the “effeminacy effect”—a historical process in which homosexuality became associated with femininity, even when not indicative of actual gender portrayal or identity. Therefore, when men attempt to subordinate other men, they do so by attacking their race/ethnicity, by feminizing them with labels such as “sissy,” “pussy,” or “bitch,” or by challenging their sexuality, using “fag discourse” (Pascoe, 2012, p. 54).

“Nerd” and “geek” are another means of emasculating men for their involvement in hobbies, such as video games, comics, and anime (Salter, 2018). Messerschmidt (2018) argues that hegemonic masculinities must be analyzed at the local, regional, and global level, which should be extended into digital spaces. Communities such as online video games, online forums, and fan conventions likely have different constructions of masculine ideals. The hegemonic masculinity of these digital spaces likely reflects the subordinated positions their occupants may have offline. As such, men who occupy nerd masculinity may form a protest masculinity—“compensatory hypermasculinities that are formed in reaction to social positions lacking economic and political power” (Messerschmidt, 2018, p. 29). Nerd masculinity develops within a context of social or political poverty, rather than financial.

Geek masculinity is subordinate to athletes and socialites offline because it is associated with lowbrow media such as video games, comic books, or anime (Kowert et al., 2014). But geek masculinity uses technological mastery to achieve certain aspects of masculine privilege in offline spaces (Salter, 2018). Separated from the dominant offline masculinity, geek masculinity can reimagine itself into an aspirational nerd masculinity. I find that in online video games, nerd masculinity acts as a protest masculinity which becomes dominant and constructs the power hierarchy to reflect hegemonic nerd masculinity. This new form of hegemonic masculinity mirrors offline spaces by privileging whiteness, heterosexuality, and masculinity, but idealizes performance in video games over physical strength—while also disparaging people who may be too nerdy or too committed to their hobby. Most gender theorization focuses on in-person interactions, so this study contributes to understanding how gender hegemony is organized within online video games.

**Online Anonymity**

It is important to understand how online anonymity may impact the competitive and gendered spaces of online video games. In video games, there is no uncomplicated way to connect a player’s online profile to their offline identity, so, players can interact with drastically reduced accountability. The maximum punishment for negative behaviors in video games is a ban, which can easily be circumvented by purchasing another copy of the game. This increased potential for anonymity and social distance as well as reduced accountability in online video games makes interactions different from offline spaces in three main ways. First, anonymity is far more possible in online spaces (Hayne & Rice, 1997). Anonymity allows people who occupy subordinated identities increased opportunities to avoid detection due to the invisibility of bodies, potentially reducing the harassment or subordination they may experience. This invisibility should reduce social expectations of acceptable play, allowing them to play the games as they would like without the fear of gender policing. However, while anonymity can free people from gender policing, it cannot undo disparate gender socialization which trains people to prefer different types of play, based on their masculinity or femininity (Bordo, 2013; Carr, 2007; Messner, 1992; Thorne, 1993). Additionally, not seeing player bodies may increase the idea that video game play is occupied by men and masculinity with competitive play and technology (Connell, 1987).

A second part of anonymity is that people feel deindividualized online—in “social conditions [which] lessen self-awareness and reduce concern with evaluation by others, thereby weakening restraints against the expression of undesirable behaviors” (Rogers & Prentice-Dunn, 1981, p. 63). This deindividuation has been shown to lead to an increase in aggression and violence (Coppolino Perfumi et al., 2019; Silke, 2003). As such, we should expect to see...
increased aggression in online spaces due to deindividuation, especially that targeting subordinated groups. This increase in aggression could work in two ways, either by encouraging people to fight back against harassers or by increasing the necessity of relying on anonymity to avoid detection and subsequent harassment.

Third, people experience disinhibition online which leads people to self-disclose more or act out more intensely and more often than in offline spaces (Suler, 2004). This complicates both anonymity and deindividuation because online, people may be more willing to self-disclose. But what form does this disclosure take, and how might different online environments affect this? Are people more willing to share their subordinated identities even in the face of harassment or does this instead encourage people to share bigoted beliefs that they may be reluctant to share offline. There are social repercussions to overt sexism and homophobia offline, but anonymity could create an atmosphere that empowers people to share these views due to reduced accountability.

These three unique conditions of the internet modify the way that people interact in online spaces by limiting the social constraints that normally inhibit or restrict certain behaviors. However, little research has focused on how anonymity affects the targeting of specific groups. This study helps identify ways that anonymous harassment may identify and target people who occupy subordinated identities within video game spaces: through symbolic harassment and channels which lead to direct harassment.

Gender in Online Play

Gender research in online play generally focuses on the underrepresentation of women, negative treatment of women, and how these affect women’s involvement in video games. Little research looks at the interaction of men within these spaces, but studies on the treatment of women can inform our understanding of how feminine or feminized men are treated by other players within online video games. While video games present fewer physical barriers to participation, socialized aversion to competition and harassment in competitive environments may contribute to feminine and feminized people’s underrepresentation in video games (Connell, 1987; Kafai, 2017; Messner, 1992; Thorne, 1993).

Sports and masculinity have become so intertwined within our culture that it is difficult for us to separate the two. Starting at a young age, boys learn to play in different ways than girls where sports can become an avenue to identify with or ‘live up to’ the power and status of their father (Messner, 1992, p. 29). For many boys, sports have become a venue to perform their power and masculinity to observers, and to assert it, sometimes violently, against their peers. Key to this performance of sports masculinity is the denigration of both gayness and femininity, which this masculinity is constructed in opposition to (Messner, 1992). However, video games complicate this dynamic because while masculinity in sports is predicated on the dominance of the ideal masculine body, video games do not require a body to be physically trained in the same way. This restricts the importance of both biological and socialized bodily differences and could potentially make video games a more inclusive sport where skill is based on time commitment without certain bodies being advantaged. While this reduction in the importance of the body might seem like it would make gender less important for involvement, gender differences persist in competition that is not very reliant on physical ability.

Other nonphysical competitive spaces such as chess offer a glimpse into gender dynamics in sports. Chess offers a better comparison for video games than something like football because physical ability does not affect play and it is not gender-segregated, while still including the competitive and strategic aspects. In chess, we still see cultural factors affecting the participation of feminine groups. Fine (2015) shows that, whereas young girls select into chess clubs at similar rates as boys, that competitiveness and sexual harassment cause them to drop out leading to underrepresentation at older ages and in competitive play. Similarly, harassment can also lead women to change their involvement with video games by leading them to leave online gaming, change the games or frequency with which they play, avoid strangers, or camouflage their gender (Cote, 2017). This may imply that anonymity protects feminine and feminized groups from leaving online video games because even with this pushout, 45% of video game players in the United States are women and girls (Entertainment Software Association, 2021).

Despite this high rate of play, harassment and aversion to competitiveness likely leads to significant gender differences in game and genre selection (Chess, 2017; Condis, 2018; Eden et al., 2010). While mixed-gender play occurs, video games may more closely resemble the formal gender separation of sports than fully gender integrated play. And in mixed-gender play, feminine and feminized people choosing silence or seclusion to avoid harassment may further reinforce the ideology that games are culturally dominated men and masculinity (Condis, 2018; Gray, 2015; Kelly et al., 2023; Shaw, 2014). Feminine play has become associated with casual games (Chess, 2017), games that are easy to learn, take place in familiar settings, are interruptible, have low punishment, and offer excessively positive feedback (Juul, 2010).

These casual games are subordinated and dismissed as not real games, while “real” gamers play “hardcore” games—defined by fiction, difficulty, time-intensive and low interruptability, high punishment for failure, and low positive feedback for success (Chess, 2017; Condis, 2018; Cote, 2020; Juul, 2010). While women may participate equally in games, Paasen et al. (2017) finds that they are less likely to identify as gamers because they do not gain social prestige from the label. Therefore, despite women’s comparable participation in games, they are pushed out or selected out of spaces that are deemed legitimate by men, choose to be silent to avoid harassment, their involvement is discredited as not “real” gaming, and they are less likely to self-define as gamers. This paper contributes to the literature by illustrating how gender harassment also occurs between men in video games and helps to elucidate the gendered assumptions of players generally and certain playstyles.

Race/Ethnicity in Online Play

While this analysis focuses primarily on gender dynamics and the gendering of sexuality, White supremacy is a mechanism of hegemonic masculinity which is mirrored within hegemonic nerd masculinity. Therefore, I lean heavily on intersectional frameworks to illustrate how gender inequity is not separate from, but rather overlaps with racial, sexuality, and other forces within online video game spaces (Crenshaw, 1991; Gray & Sarkeesian, 2020; Hill Collins, 2009). The subordination of non-White players manifests both in the content of games, which portray non-White characters less frequently and less centrally, and through the overt racial harassment of players in games (Dietrich, 2013; Gray, 2015). Women of color often are disproportionately impacted by both lack of portrayal and by the overlapping harassment they
experience (Nakamura, 2012). This, along with racial inequality in employment, likely explains why though 13% of people in the United States are Black and 19% are Latino, of Americans who play games only 8% are Black and 10% Latino (Entertainment Software Association, 2022). It is likely that non-White participants have similar coping mechanisms to those of women—changing gaming habits, avoiding detection, or retreating from games—however, this has not been explored in depth. This study shows how non-White players experience harassment symbolically online and identifies that their voices or playstyles may identify them as non-White resulting in harassment. With this study, I aim to show how gender, sexuality, and racial/ethnic harassment combine and overlap in online video games and in hegemonic nerd masculinity.

While the harassment and policing of non-White, nonheterosexual, and nonmen is consistent with how hegemonic masculinity functions, researchers have focused almost exclusively on interaction between binary categories. This article aims to expand upon harassment literature in online video games by looking at gender harassment within identity category and how it compounds with racial/ethnic harassment. If feminine and feminized groups prefer to play different types of games and are disproportionately silent when they play competitive games, what are the mechanisms that perpetuate the masculine domination of this space? This analysis illustrates that harassment is present and impactful to player experiences even when players hide their subordinated identities. Hiding racial, gender, or sexuality does not prevent the enforcement of hegemonic nerd masculinity within these gaming spaces, it merely changes the establishment of these power structures from implicit to explicit.

**Data and Methods**

**Data**

To capture player experiences and ground them within a larger population of gamers, I used a mixed-methods approach with survey data and nested interviews. The survey was designed to capture player gender demographics, gameplay preferences, in-game role preferences, and experiences interacting with other players. I recruited participants for this anonymous electronic survey across the social media websites Facebook, Reddit, and Twitter, by posting in groups, subreddits (interest groups on reddit.com), and Twitter hashtags for LGBTQ+ people who play video games. Participants had to be men, LGBTQ+, 18 years or older, and play online video games (even if they do not exclusively or always identify as men). I collected 3,203 responses between June and August 2018. Of these participants, 3,097 met the eligibility criteria, agreed to participate, and provided informed consent. After dropping participants with missing responses to questions about the dependent variables, gender, sexuality, and racial/ethnic harassment ($n=284$) or focal independent variables, gender identity, gender expression, sexuality, and race/ethnicity ($n=141$), the final analytic sample size was 2,694. Survey participants had an average age of 28 and were mostly White (81%), gay (82%), cisgender (87%), and well-educated (44% had a bachelor’s degree or higher).

For the second data set, I recruited 20 interviewees from survey participants who reported willingness to be interviewed. Using a stratified random sample, I selected interviewees equally across the four highest participating racial/ethnic groups (five Black, five Latino/e, five Asian, and five White) as well as trans and cis men from each racial category (eight trans, 10 cis, and two nonbinary/genderqueer). I chose this sampling method to show the breadth of men’s experiences and highlight how intersecting identities structure experiences. In August and September of 2018, I interviewed participants using voice-only communication through Skype and Discord (text, voice, and video communication apps). My interview methodology was based on ethnographic interviews within virtual spaces (Boellstorff, 2012). I did not use video-chat options to replicate the environment of participants’ gaming experiences with the goal of yielding richer data. Using voice-only communication likely increased participant willingness to self-disclose due to the disinhibiting effects of anonymity discussed previously; however, this also restricted my ability to read participant body language.

Semistructured interviews ranged from 40 to 90 min and focused on accounts of how participant demographics affect interactions with games and other players. My interview guide was structured to discuss participant demographics, gaming behaviors, gender online, gaming representation, and player interaction. I often incorporated follow-up questions to better understand participant narratives and allowed participants to ask questions of me mid-interview. At the end of the interview, I asked participants if there were any questions I should have asked, and their responses were sometime incorporated into the interview guide. I often employed both my insider status to avoid surface-level explanations of online video games and outsider statuses to gain a broad understanding of their experiences and perceptions. As a gamer and a queer person assigned male at birth, I was able to tactically mobilize aspects of insider and outsider statuses to build rapport and to better understand a depth and breadth of their experiences.

Interviews were manually transcribed by me and two undergraduate research assistants. All transcripts were double-verified and then coded using NVivo qualitative software (Lumivero). Using concept and axial coding methods, I coded each interview twice, first identifying emergent codes (e.g., anti-Black slurs, does not use voice chat, preference for women characters) and then comparing across emergent codes to refine the coding scheme and develop themes (e.g., non-Black harassment, voice reveals subordinated status, feminine or feminized play) (Saldana, 2016). While I used a mixed-methods sequential Quan to Qual research design where quantitative data were collected prior to qualitative data, I prioritized qualitative findings in my analysis (Plano Clark & Ivanikova, 2016). Emergent survey trends informed interview questions, but the emergent interview narratives are the primary analysis and were used to determine the appropriate quantitative analysis. I lightly edited quotes to remove verbal tics (uh, um, like, yeah, etc.), improve readability, and protect participants’ identities. Additionally, I utilize fabricated gamertags—online persona and account names used in video games—in lieu of pseudonyms, to humanize those behind gamertags and illustrate the cultural context of their experiences.

For the quantitative analysis, I estimated multinomial logistic regression models (MLM) to assess the impact of gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity on participants’ likelihood of experiencing harassment. Multinomial logistic regression is appropriate for the analysis of categorical dependent variables, described below, because it makes no assumptions about the latent ordering of the response categories. The MNLM can be thought of as a set of simultaneously estimated binary logistic regression models, with a set of included categories of the dependent variable compared with an omitted, or “base” category. The coefficients are interpreted as the relationships between the independent variables and the likelihood of being in the included categories of the dependent variable,
relative to the excluded category. In the analysis presented below, I treat the middle category (sometimes or occasionally harassed) as the base category because it is the most frequent response. Therefore, the analysis will determine what variables predict participants’ likeliness to be harassed more, or less, than the modal category.

Table 1 shows self-reported participant demographics segregated for cis, trans, and nonbinary participants. Tables 2–4 report the results from the analysis in which the metric of the coefficient is log odds. These coefficients are useful for assessing the direction and statistical significance of the relationships between participant demographics and the likelihood of experiencing harassment. The first models in each table (labeled “bivariate” in the headers) come from regressions of the dependent variables on each focal independent variable—gender identity, gender expression, sexuality, and race/ethnicity—individually (i.e., without any other variables in the model). The second models (labeled “full” in the headers) are adjusted with all focal independent variables and controls. In addition, I report outcomes from the full models as predicted probabilities in Table 5, which are interpreted as the probability that a member of each demographic category reported that level of harassment, with all other characteristics set to the mean.

Impact of Online Recruitment

Online recruitment gave me access to a much larger sample of queer men than I would have normally been able to reach. However, no previous research explores the racial demographics of English-speaking queer adult men who play video games.
especially internationally. But, comparing my demographics to the those of the North American player base adds important context. The Entertainment Software Association (2022) finds that while 59% of Americans are White, 71% of people who play video games are White. Asian participants also seem slightly more likely to play video games, with roughly 6% of Americans being Asian versus 7% of Americans who play games. Conversely, Black Americans (13% vs. 8%) and Hispanic Americans (19% vs. 10%) are less likely to play video game. While White participants are overrepresented, my survey has an even larger White population and smaller Black population. This is likely due to my sampling restrictions for English language which increase the likeliness that White people would end up in my survey. Additionally, because I recruited in spaces organized around queerness and video games, White people may have been more concentrated due to the exclusion or negative treatment of non-White people which happens in both gaming and queer spaces (Bell & Binnie, 2004; Gray, 2015). To highlight intersectional experiences across race and sexuality, and to compensate for the high saturation of White participants in my survey. I intentionally recruited interviewees equally across the four racial groups with the highest participation in the survey.

### Focal Independent Variables

The four focal independent variables are gender identity, gender expression, sexuality, and race/ethnicity. Gender identity is self-reported and coded as dummy variables for cisgender men, transgender men, and genderqueer/nonbinary. Gender expression uses responses to “How would you identify your own gender presentation in everyday life?” and ranges on a 5-point scale from very masculine to very feminine with nonbinary and androgynous as the midpoint. Sexuality is coded as a set of dummy variables corresponding to respondents’ self-identification as gay, bisexual, pansexual, queer, asexual, straight, or other (while “straight” is included, cisgender heterosexual men were not eligible for participation in this survey). For race, participants selected all applicable from White, Latino/e, biracial/multiracial, Asian, Black/African American, American Indian/Alaskan Native, Middle Eastern/ North African, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, or a fill-in “other” option. Due to low participation of some racial groups, I

### Dependent Variables

The three dependent variables for this analysis are sexuality harassment (How often do you feel harassed or discriminated against for being LGBTQ+?), gender harassment (How often do you feel harassed or discriminated against because you are perceived as not masculine enough?), and racial/ethnic harassment (How often do you feel harassed or discriminated against for your race/ethnicity?). Participants reported the frequency of their experiences with harassment on a 5-point scale (Never, sometimes, occasionally, frequently, and almost always). Here, I have reduced these to a three-category variable (never = 0, sometimes or occasionally = 1, and frequently or almost always = 2).

### Table 2 Coeficient and SE Estimates From Multinomial Logistic Regressions of Gender Harassment on Focal Independent Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focal Independent Variables</th>
<th>Model 1 (bivariate)</th>
<th>Model 2 (full)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coefficient</td>
<td>SE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender identity (vs. cis men)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trans men</td>
<td>-0.37**</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonbinary</td>
<td>-0.61**</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender expression (vs. very masculine)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat masculine</td>
<td>-1.06***</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Androgynous</td>
<td>-1.32***</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat feminine</td>
<td>-1.99***</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very feminine</td>
<td>-1.47**</td>
<td>0.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexuality (vs. gay)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Straight/hetero</td>
<td>1.67**</td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>-0.23</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asexual</td>
<td>-0.39</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pansexual</td>
<td>-0.54**</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race and ethnicity (vs. White)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino/e</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Another race</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = 2,579; two-tailed tests. Full model includes controls for age, education, gaming skill, games per week, gaming PC, gaming social, cooperative play, player versus player play, and solo play. 

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
have reduced racial identification to five categories to increase the clarity of tables: Black, White, Asian, Latino/e, and another race. Hispanic ethnicity was included separately as a binary variable. I included the option to identify both as Latino/e and Hispanic separately and because enough participants identified as only one, either Latino/e and non-Hispanic \( n = 77 \) or Hispanic and not racially Latino/e \( n = 22 \), I opted to include them as separate categories.

### Control Variables

#### General Demographics

General demographics capture self-reported age and education. Age was reported in years, with a minimum of 18. Education was reported as “highest level of education,” and coded into high school or less \( = 0 \), trade/technical/vocational training/associate’s degree/some college \( = 1 \), bachelor’s degree \( = 2 \), and graduate degree or professional degree \( = 3 \).

#### Gaming Demographics

These are self-reported demographics specific to individual play styles. First, gaming skill comes from the question “How would you rank yourself in terms of skill compared with the average gamer?” and was reported as below average \( = 0 \), average \( = 1 \), and above average \( = 2 \). Games per week uses the question “In an average week, how many hours of video games do you play?” and grouped into \( 0–6 \) hr \( = 0 \), \( 7–12 \) hr \( = 1 \), and \( 13+ \) hr \( = 2 \). Gaming PC captures those participants who play on a computer \( = 1 \) versus those who play on another system \( = 0 \) (PlayStation, Xbox, Switch, Handheld, cellphone, and other). Gaming social captures “What percentage of time spent gaming are you in contact with other players?” which is coded as less than \( 20\% = 0 \), \( 21–60\% = 1 \), and \( 61–100\% = 2 \). Finally, I include game type as three binary variables: cooperative, player versus player, and single play, as answers to “Which types of games are you typically drawn to?” Multiple answers were allowed for game type.

### Findings

Participants reported that they experienced or saw harassment in most multiplayer games, but at higher levels in games with player versus player gameplay, and the highest in cooperative player versus player. Cooperative player versus player games are those where teams of players compete against each other, often grouped according to skill by game algorithms. Competitive games were consistently associated with high levels of harassment, but participants reported wide variation across different types of competitive and noncompetitive games. The game genres participants associated with the most harassment were first-person shooters and multiplayer online battle arenas. The 20 interview participants expressed frequent experiences with harassment and a variety of accounts for why harassment occurs. Across their narratives, many identified a frequent form to the progression of harassment.
First, queer gamers experienced “symbolic harassment,” which I define as harassment targeting a subordinated identity without knowing whether anyone from that group is present. This harassment serves as an abstract and symbolic claim to the privileging and subordination of certain social groups within hegemonic nerd masculinity. Symbolic harassment often progressed from indirect/direct symbolic harassment to direct harassment through three major channels: performance, playstyle, or voice. Direct harassment, which targets a player and their identities directly, focused on a player’s gender, sexuality, race, or ethnicity. Once a player was targeted with direct harassment, the harassment often continued for the entire game and occasionally extended into direct messages or future games from either one or multiple other players.

**Symbolic Harassment**

Nearly half (n = 8) of the interviewees reported that symbolic harassment nearly always occurs within online video games. Players experience symbolic harassment in two ways: indirect symbolic harassment, which is nontargeted terms or slurs used to create an atmosphere and establish undesirable groups; and direct symbolic harassment, which is derogatory terms or negative stereotypes targeting a specific player without the belief that they fit their real identities. Both indirect and direct harassments create a hostile environment by reifying the social hierarchy of nerd masculinity.

Indirect symbolic harassment manifests as antagonistic statements made by players at low-performing, non-White, queer, or feminine players to establish an atmosphere and hierarchy in individual game matches that reflect larger power dynamics in online gaming. For example, players may react to in-game events such as someone winning, losing, or dying by shouting slurs directed at women, queer men, and non-White people, even when irrelevant to the situation. However, many players rationalized the use of slurs in video games as a joke or a cultural norm, as explained by FrostFireMonk, a 19-year-old, White, pansexual, and trans man:

I think with the general culture of dark humor that can easily be construed as racism . . . So, there’s quite a common culture of gaming communities using jokes that have racial slurs in them . . . but I find the people aren’t actively harassed or assaulted for being different races . . . generally I think the people within those spaces are going to be the people who are sort of in on it and enjoying the jokes. Obviously, I’m sure people are going to be hurt by it.

FrostFireMonk grounds his understanding of racism in gaming cultural norms and assumes that harm is not intended but acknowledges that it may, nonetheless, occur. He says there is a general audience that will enjoy and be “in on” the racist jokes, and a subset of people who may be upset. He admits that the intent of people those spaces are going to be the people who are sort of in on it and enjoying the jokes. Obviously, I’m sure people are going to be hurt by it.

**Table 4 Coefﬁcient and SE Estimates From Multinomial Logistic Regressions of Racial/Ethnic Harassment on Focal Independent Variables**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1 (bivariate)</th>
<th>Model 2 (full)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>None vs. some</td>
<td>Frequent vs. some</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coefﬁcient SE</td>
<td>Coefﬁcient SE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender identity (vs. cis men)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trans men</td>
<td>0.70*** 0.21</td>
<td>1.22*** 0.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonbinary</td>
<td>−0.31 0.19</td>
<td>0.35 0.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender expression (vs. very masculine)</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat masculine</td>
<td>0.11 0.16</td>
<td>−0.36 0.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Androgynous</td>
<td>−0.12 0.19</td>
<td>−0.17 0.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat feminine</td>
<td>0.09 0.21</td>
<td>−0.54 0.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very feminine</td>
<td>−0.33 0.48</td>
<td>−13.54 798.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sexuality (vs. gay)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Straight/hetero</td>
<td>1.17 0.74</td>
<td>−11.80 761.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>0.16 0.19</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>0.09 0.14</td>
<td>0.29 0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pansexual</td>
<td>0.14 0.19</td>
<td>0.65 0.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race and ethnicity (vs. White)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>−2.20*** 0.28</td>
<td>1.65*** 0.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>−1.79*** 0.18</td>
<td>0.33 0.39</td>
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<tr>
<td>Latino/e</td>
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<td>0.17 0.53</td>
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<tr>
<td>Another race</td>
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<td>−0.19 0.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>−0.21 0.24</td>
<td>0.76 0.52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = 2,579; two-tailed tests. Full model includes controls for age, education, gaming skill, games per week, gaming PC, gaming social, cooperative play, player versus player play, and solo play.

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
Typically, I think most harassment that I’ve seen in video games has just been generally toxic people being generally toxic to everyone. So, like, generally it’ll just be somebody being a shithead and coming in saying, “oh my team is all faggots and like, you know, you all suck dick.” (BoyBlue, 20, Asian, straight, trans man)

This quote shows that while indirect symbolic harassment may not directly target a single player, it still operates on the subordination of other groups. This illustrates that nerd masculinity views homosexuality in the same way as traditional hegemonic masculinity but says so much more freely/explicitly because due to the reduction of accountability that anonymity offers. Additionally, many of these slurs can overlap, disproportionately affecting people with identities at the intersections of these subordinated groups.

Participants likened direct symbolic harassment to “trash talk” or “trolling”—a type of harassment where online players try to elicit an emotional response from other players—and treated this as a norm for player interaction (Mantilla, 2015). Players would launch insults or defamatory statements at a target, without regard for their accuracy. These types of harassment were so generic and impersonal that Flaxon, a 27-year-old Black polysexual cis man, likened them to a random insult generator; a random insult generator that spits out gender, sexuality, and racial slurs. And, while symbolic harassment reflects other types of harassment, it is distinct because it has not yet progressed to targeting a player and remains symbolically targeted at groups which may not be present. This harassment contributes to establishing an environment where these groups may feel and be seen as unwanted. Through this rhetoric, groups are established as subordinate through insults directed at no one and everyone simultaneously. When faced with symbolic harassment, players have the option to either comply/stay quiet or challenge the harasser. However, often participants did not confront harassers because this would cause harassment to progress to direct harassment.

### Channels to Direct Harassment

While harassment can stay at the symbolic level, participants reported three common ways it progresses to target specific players: performance, playstyle, or voice. These personal attributes channel symbolic harassment to direct harassment by shifting harassment from abstract attacks on identity categories to personalized attacks against a player in the game. As BigTrouble points out, these channels separated an individual player from other players in the game or illuminated a subordinated status which precludes access to hegemonic nerd masculinity.

In a game like Overwatch, I would say [harassment] starts when other people are able to identify something about you that they’re not able to identify about the rest of the team. (BigTrouble, 35, White, bisexual, cis man)
Any personal information divulged in online video games which could separate you from the gamer norm could lead to direct harassment. I call these channels because they structure the flow of harassment from symbolic to direct. Of the many possible channels to direct harassment, skill, voice, and playstyle were most frequently reported by participants.

**Skill Harassment**

The most frequently reported channel was poor performance \((n = 12)\). This was either based on performance in an individual match or overall placement within a formal ranked game system. This served as a channel because players would target underperforming players and demean their capabilities. This sometimes leads to harassers trying to remove their target from the game or to get their game account banned through reports to game administration. However, as Brox, a 30-year-old Black/Latino/e gay cis man explained, “It usually starts with performance, but doesn’t stay there for long.” This is because struggling against harassment may make you more prone to direct harassment once this channel has been initiated. Lobi, a 24-year-old White pansexual cis man, illustrates how skill harassment becomes more individualized and how the focus becomes more targeted:

People start with just something very broad like “wow, you suck bro.” And then, when you retaliate, mad goes bad, and they start moving inward with their insults when they find out more about you, or you indirectly reveal something. If you start talking and they hear that you have a feminine voice, you know, “you faggot!” and they start bringing in more direct offense to you.

This shows that nerd masculinity values and polices skill in video games the same way that online masculinity values physical or sports prowess. And, perhaps like offline interactions, interviewees generally advised against fighting back for two reasons: first, because it may become a battle of masculine posturing in front of a peer group, which may increase the viciousness of their attacks; and second, because in responding you may reveal something about yourself, implying a marginalized status that the harasser grasps on to.

**Voice Harassment**

A less common channel to direct harassment was voice harassment \((n = 9)\). While most interviewees did not discuss voice directly, it became a channel to direct harassment in three main ways: vocal pitch, speech patterns, or expression of emotions. As Shepson points out:

Usually [harassment] doesn’t come up until somebody turns on voice chat and they don’t sound traditionally masculine. And then, a horde of gamers just say awful things. It comes up with voice chat because otherwise it’s not immediately obvious. Even with women, it’s not immediately obvious they’re women. I know most women avoid voice chat because if they do speak, they would be harassed. I was much the same for a while because my voice sounded feminine and like a girl. (Shepson, 21, Black/White, gay, trans man)

Here, Shepson illustrates how one’s voice can lead to other players harassing you. This is because there are stereotypes about how queer men speak, which can lead to group-based discrimination (Fasoli et al., 2021). Shepson references his hesitancy to speak in video games because it would separate him from the pack. This separation from the expected/normalized identities of the space often led to harassment. And, due to the invisibility of bodies within this space, nerd masculinity places more importance on the voice of gamers, by reading race, gender, and sexuality into tone and word usage.

While this was the second most-reported channel for harassment, this may be more pervasive because many participants avoided using voice chat. Of survey participants, 19% of those who play games with voice chat reported changing their voice to avoid harassment \((n = 365)\), 26% stopped using voice chat due to harassment \((n = 508)\), and 45% refrained from speaking to avoid harassment \((n = 944)\). Avoiding voice chat creates significant barriers to success in games, and some participants mentioned that not speaking leads to you being harassed for a lack of skill or “callouts,”—sharing pertinent in-game information such as enemy locations via voice chat—which are beneficial in some games.

**Playstyle Harassment**

The final channel to direct harassment was playstyle harassment \((n = 8)\). Here, participants experienced harassment based on how they play games. Harassers often projected a marginalized status onto a player due to their character selection, role, or how they played. In some cases, certain characters might be associated with certain demographics of players, as RadMaker points out:

I am also a gay male playing Symmetra and that’s already a stereotype because a lot of the youtubers who play Symmetra are gay. Or like, if I’m a guy playing a support character, oh, I must be gay. And then, they’ll always say, “oh, you’re just picking that character because you have no skill.” Even though the skillset for Symmetra is different than the skillset for soldier. (RadMaker, 28, Asian/White, gay, cis man)

RadMaker’s quote illustrates how character selection or role type may cause assumptions about your sexuality or skill level. In this case, playstyles linked both those playing supportive roles in video games and specific characters like Symmetra from Overwatch to the player being queer. This could imply either that these roles/characters are feminized or that there is a preferential trend occurring here that players have identified.

Healing and support roles—predicated on care work, where a player’s goal is to empower or heal their allies—were deemed easier than other roles by harassers and associated with both queer men and women. Interviewees reported a variety of assumptions made about them based on the characters they played. Kaneki, a 28-year-old Asian questioning trans man, reported that he got harassed for being gay because the character he made was attractive and well-dressed, while another participant, ChaosNate, a 19-year-old Latino pansexual trans man, explained how his friend had racial slurs hurled at him for playing a Black character. These harassers assumed ChaosNate’s friend was Black because “otherwise no one plays [that character].” This demonstrates the stereotypes gamers use to interpret both what and how others play, and what that may imply about those players.

**Direct Harassment**

While these channels sometimes overlap, they often bridge into more intense personal harassment. Players may be harassed for their skill, voice, or playstyle, but most participants considered this a middle point which often progressed to direct harassment about gender, sexuality, or race/ethnicity. In the next sections, I will discuss these types of direct harassment.
Sexuality/Gender Harassment

While gender and sexuality harassment are different, I discuss them together because of their frequent overlap in participants’ accounts, which are likely due to the association between feminine men and queer sexuality (Hennen, 2008). Effeminacy and gay identity are treated as synonymous and thus subordinated to uphold the ideals of hegemonic nerd masculinity.

Every interviewee reported either experiencing or witnessing gender and sexuality harassment. Harassment varied across games, with participants reporting certain games or genres having more than others. Some games, such as first-person shooters, were considered much more anti-queer, while role-playing games were more queer-friendly. Participants experienced this harassment in a variety of forms, some experienced the banning of queer groups, while most reported being insulted, from the milder “you’re gay” to the more frequent “you fucking faggot.” While gender and sexuality harassment came through all channels, more participants reported it being a result of a player’s voice than anything else.

If you’re a woman or a feminine-sounding man and you speak up in voice chat, that’s when it starts. Like, they’ve identified what they think you are and that’s when they start harassing you about who they think you are. (BigTrouble, 35, White, bisexual, cis man)

As BigTrouble notes, not meeting gendered expectations of voice or speech patterns was enough for players to be targeted with harassment for who they are assumed to be. This further contextualizes why players often avoided speaking or changed their voices.

Survey data further illustrate widespread and frequent harassment of queer participants, with only 36% of participants saying that they never experience harassment for not being masculine enough (n = 971) and 22% never experiencing harassment for their sexuality (n = 592). However, as Table 5 illustrates, this harassment is not shared equally across all participants. When asked about how frequently they experienced harassment, most participants reported that they sometime or occasionally experience harassment for either gender (58%; n = 1,555) or sexuality (66%; n = 1,772). In Tables 2–4, I use MLNM with “sometimes or occasionally” experiencing harassment as the reference category.

Table 5 uses the full models from Tables 2–4 and shows predicted probabilities as proportions to predict the likeliness that participants would report this level of harassment, controlling for other variables. There are a few noteworthy findings. First, compared with trans and nonbinary, cisgender participants were less likely to experience gender and sexuality harassment—illustrated by a higher predicted probability in the “never” category and lower in the “frequently/always” category. Additionally, gender expression had a linear association with harassment: as self-reported femininity increased, so did the likeliness of experiencing both gender and sexuality harassment. For sexuality, straight men were less likely, and queer and pansexual participants more likely, to experience gender and sexuality harassment. Finally, Asian participants were less likely to experience both gender and sexuality harassment compared with other racial groups, while those in the “another race” category were more likely to experience these.

Race/Ethnicity Harassment

Racial and ethnic harassment was the second most-common type of harassment reported by interviewees (n = 13). Racial and ethnic harassment shared many similarities with gender and sexuality harassment. Interviewees indicated that race was present in symbolic harassment, and that direct racial or ethnic harassment did not always attempt to target the player’s actual race. When advanced to direct harassment, this manifests in racial slurs and association of players with racial stereotypes. This was reported most often when players had cultural or ethnic speech patterns that hinted at a marginalized status, shown by BoyBlue, a 20-year-old, Asian, straight, trans man’s quote:

There was a guy with a really strong Indian accent and the people in my game were making fun of him for his accent. But generally, with race, like no one can tell that I’m Asian on the internet unless I say that I’m Asian.

BoyBlue points out an important distinction that actual race is not what matters but rather the visibility of race within online spaces. White and Asian interviewees reported rarely or never experiencing racial harassment, while Latino/e and Black interviewees reported elevated levels of racial harassment. While interviewees reported a variety of racial slurs, those targeting Black people were most frequent, mentioned by 90% of interviewees, compared with 25%, the highest percentage for any other racial category slur. This targeting of Black players, directly and abstractly, is further reflected in the survey data.

While racial harassment was prominent across interview narratives, this was not reflected to the same extent within the survey data. Instead, 74% of survey participants said that they never experience racial harassment in online games (n = 1,988). This is likely due to the overrepresentation of White participants in the survey and likely reflects an earlier quote from FrostFireMonk, who references how “dark humor” in gaming may lead people to use racist language but not perceive it as racist—but, as he alludes, it is likely perceived differently by those it targets. This underreport of racial harassment is likely due to the high density of White survey participants (81%; n = 2,185). However, when asked if they see others harassed for their race or ethnicity, only 21% of participants answered “never” (n = 568)—which may still be reflecting this dark humor concept. After adjustment for race, the predicted probabilities from Table 5 align with interviewee accounts. Black, Latino/e, Asian, and other racial groups were much less likely to never experience harassment about their race or ethnicity compared with White participants. Tables 4 and 5 illustrate that Black and trans participants were the only groups that were significantly more likely to experience racial/ethnic harassment.

Discussion

My findings about video game interaction show how hegemonic masculinity follows us into digital spaces. Due to the invisibility of bodies in online video games, policing of subordinated and marginalized bodies within hegemonic nerd masculinity takes a different form. Rather than covertly identifying and subordinating these groups, many players in online video games have an explicit rhetoric that disparages these groups either through slurs that are not targeting any players directly or through the harassment of players using racist, homophobic, or sexist language without any belief that they may fit the players. This symbolic harassment establishes a hierarchy of bodies within nerd culture where anonymous players are assumed to be White, heterosexual, skillful, and men. In a game, players may deliberately or inadvertently reveal something about themselves that allows other players to identify them as outsiders within hegemonic nerd masculinity. This could
be a failure to play skillfully or an identity revelation through voice or gameplay choices, which changes harassment from symbolically targeting subordinated groups to directly targeting players who are associated with or belong to said groups. This harassment negatively impacts many players who are not White, skillful, heterosexual, or men (among other identities), and often leads to them either leaving games altogether or changing their playstyles to avoid detection and harassment. The negative impacts of video games are likely exponential for players who experience multiple overlapping types of harassment due to holding intersecting subordinated identities.

This research yields three major theoretical implications. First, I introduce the concept of symbolic harassment to capture how abstract harassment by dominant groups in online video games is used to organize hegemonic ideals. Video games are an embodied activity even when bodies are not visible, and symbolic harassment establishes and reproduces the differential valuation of bodies. The accuracy of the insults is unimportant, as with Pascoe’s (2012) concept of “fag discourse,” which compares the hurling of gender/sexuality slurs to a game of hot potato. It does not matter if the person left holding the insult at the end is the targeted demographic, the game reinforces the valuation of the group and the undesirability of the insulted player.

In video games, there is no single channel for the communication and establishment of cultural norms. Rather, video game culture is reinforced across millions of smaller player interactions across games of all sizes and types. The message of which identities are valued is not present in every gaming interaction, nor is the message always consistent. As I illustrated above, some participants experienced only racial, ethnic, sexuality, gender, or ability harassment individually, some experienced none, while others experienced the intersections of many. While the prevalence and persistence of these messages vary, the many individual voices of symbolic harassment culminate into the voice of hegemonic nerd masculinity. This voice speaks from the perspective of the ideal stereotypical gamer (White, masculine, heterosexual, skillful, etc.) and against those who deviate from this norm.

Second, while harassment often begins at the symbolic level, participants identified three channels leading to direct harassment. Performance, voice, and playstyle are ways that participants may separate themselves from the ideal established by symbolic harassment. Many of these are seen as failures at appropriate racial and masculine presentation. Those who performed poorly were harassed for a failure of masculine achievement. Those with a feminine voice, queer speech patterns, or emotional display failed at an expected masculine and heterosexual demeanor. Additionally, the way that people play may associate them with a nondominant group. Playing a woman, non-White, feminine, or queer character, whether customized or pregenerated, may create suspicion of subordinated status. Additionally, ways of playing also triggered suspicion, such as preferring to play a feminized role (healer or support character). Finally, certain characters are deemed easy or overpowered, which may undermine skill, and as such, masculine achievement. While these are only some of the channels where hegemonic nerd masculinity changes from symbolic to direct harassment, once initiated, harassment did not linger here long, progressing to targeted attacks on player’s identities.

Third, while many interviewees believed offline harassment was less frequent and aggressive than in the past, all interviewees (n = 20) and 71% of survey respondents (n = 1,884) said that harassment occurs more often online than offline. This is likely caused by reduced accountability and punishment in online video games due to increased anonymity and lower stakes. Harassment often goes unpunished and the maximum punishment—a ban—can be circumvented by purchasing another copy of the game. Games that try to moderate hate speech appear to be unable to monitor voice chat, an increasingly prevalent communication medium. However, while anonymity disinhibits and encourages harassers, it does not have the same impact on those targeted by harassment. Only 30% (n = 810) of survey participants and 35% (n = 7) of interview participants said that they have ever responded to harassment. Instead, participants were much more likely to ignore (65%; n = 1,760), report (67%; n = 1,803), or block harassers (68%; n = 1,845). Many participants even reported changing the way they play (42%; n = 1,143) or the frequency that they played (24%; n = 659).

That harassment is disinhibited while response to harassment seems inhibited is a significant finding. As many participants mentioned, speaking up, whether to communicate or in opposition to harassment, frequently led to increased harassment. I believe the inhibition of responding to harassment occurs for four reasons. First, in online video games, symbolic harassment is used to construct an ideal body for the space. In many situations, due to the invisibility of bodies, all bodies are assumed to belong to the dominant groups in gaming until proven otherwise. Therefore, response to harassers may be inhibited by the potential for all other players to belong to the dominant group and to join in—a sort-of racialized panopticon. As such, it may feel impossible for participants to win by pushing back against the power structure. Second, by speaking out, participants risk revealing more about themselves or confirming suspicion of their outsider status. Third, challenging men who are attempting to assert their masculinity over others may instead increase voracity of harassment. Finally, by not responding, participants may be attempting to block the channel to direct harassment and thus leave the harassment at the level of symbolic harassment. Because, struggling against being labeled as “other” may only induce and exacerbate the direct harassment.

While the experiences of all interviewees point to frequent harassment in online spaces, survey respondents reported lower levels. This disparity likely happens for three reasons: (a) the difference between interview and survey data methods; (b) the difference in demographics between interviews (75% people of color and 50% trans/nonbinary/genderqueer) and surveys (26% people of color and 17% trans/nonbinary/genderqueer), or more likely that 25% of interviewees were Black—the group who reported the most harassment—while only 3% of survey participants were Black; or (c) as FrostFireMonk’s quote about dark humor indicates, participants from dominant groups may not consider symbolic harassment to be harassment because it is not always directed at a single player. Instead, people may rationalize discrimination that happens to groups they are not members of or rationalize harassment that they experience as normative within the space.

In addition to the disparity of harassment reports across instruments, I want to highlight the disparity of harassment across groups. My data show that more marginalized gamers and those who occupy multiple marginalized statuses experience much higher rates of harassment than White cisgender gay men. These types of harassment are not mutually exclusive and all types of harassment I discussed above can target the same people. Thus, femme queer men of color are much more likely to experience gender, sexuality, and racial harassment than more privileged groups, illustrating the need for an intersectional approach. While survey respondents were primarily White, this may be due to the types of spaces that I recruited in, those organized around queerness and gaming. It is likely that respondents are representative of
these spaces because these spaces may be hostile to more marginalized groups or dismiss/perpetuate racist rhetoric. Thus, more mainstream queer gaming groups may reflect the group of queer gamers who most closely reflect hegemonic nerd masculinity.

My findings illustrate that social issues present in offline interaction follow people into virtual worlds and negatively impact their experience with this leisure activity. The harassment directed at participants drastically changed their experience with gaming. Many interviewees expressed that the prevalence of slurs directed at their identities made them feel unwelcome. It changed the way they played, limited their communication with others, made them feel like they needed to hide who they were, and in many ways, forced them back into a virtual closet. Online video games are not only spaces structured by nerd masculinity but also spaces where harassment reigns without accountability. Video games are supposed to be fun and give us an opportunity to escape from the troubles of our everyday lives, but they are yet another space where subordinated groups encounter oppression.

Conclusion

This study presents strong contributions to our theoretical understandings of sports, masculinity, and video games. First, I contribute to the literature on sports by presenting video games for serious consideration by sports scholars. Second, I add to the literature on masculinity by identifying and beginning to define a different type of hegemonic masculinity, hegemonic nerd masculinity. Third, I show how symbolic harassment can be used to subordinate bodies even when they are not visible. Fourth, I illustrate the numerous ways that harassment can manifest in online video games, likely pushing out groups who experience harassment but especially those who experience intersecting and overlapping types of harassment. Many of these players described themselves as weathering or persisting despite the hostile environment of online video games, and it is likely that those who experience hostility targeting multiple aspects of their identities experience more of a strain on their enjoyment of games.

As Raewyn Connell (2005) says, “everyday life is an arena of gender politics, not an escape from it” (p. 3). My findings illustrate that, as with offline sports, video games are not a break from the politics of masculinity, heterosexuality, and whiteness; they are merely a virtual arena for them. The prevalence of harassment in online video games illustrates the importance of studying video gaming communities, because while they may seem more distant from bodily and social issues than traditional sports, harassment and social issues may be intensified in these spaces due to the anonymity, disinhibition, and lack of accountability. These real-life issues spill over into video games and make virtual reality life become virtually real life.

Future research should look at how experiences of harassment vary among women, nonbinary folk, and cisgender heterosexual gamers. We should seek to understand how and if these experiences change the way people play online video games, or whether they retreat from them entirely. Additionally, we should investigate whether there is a connection between people playing video games and selecting into careers in technology or science, because if “nerdy” leisure time affects career choice, then the prevalent harassment in online video games may contribute to the gender disparity in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics careers. Video game interactions have real-world effects and looking at how anonymity and leisure activities can impact real-world interaction gives us better insights into human interaction.

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