“YEAH I’M A GIRL. I PLAY VIDEO GAMES.”: IDENTITY WORK OF COLLEGIATE WOMEN GAMERS

by

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ABSTRACT

Despite accounting for almost half of the game playing population, women gamers are an underrepresented and excluded group within the gaming culture, both in regards to the advertising and production of video games. Prior research suggests that male gamers exclude women from gaming activities, question their legitimacy within the community, and create hostile environments for women both virtually in-game and in physical gaming spaces. As such, women gamers can be understood to hold a marginalized status with the gaming community. The current study looks to examine how women define themselves as "gamers" while negotiating this marginalized status. By adopting an identity work perspective, this research examines if and how women gamers perform identity work strategies, and more specifically the generic social processes defined by Schwalbe et al (2000) and expanded upon by Ezzell (2009). Drawing from interviews with 12 collegiate women gamers, this study explores how women define themselves as gamers through the identity codes of the gaming community, specifically through forms of commitment such as their time or honing their expertise. The data additionally explore how women negotiate a gendered gamer identity, as the identity codes they use to define themselves as gamers are often associated with gendered stereotypes, such as the "girl gamer" stereotypes, causing the women to utilize identity work processes, such as othering and subordinate adaptation, in order to maintain their gamer identity. As little research has looked to explore women gamers and their gamer identity construction, the present study addresses this gap in the literature through the unique theoretical lens of the identity work perspective.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the boom of in-home gaming consoles in the United States during the 1990s, more individuals are gaining access to video games and changing the face of gaming culture (Cassell and Jenkins 1998; Flanagan 2003; Fox and Tang 2014; Kafai et al 2008). Creators, producers, consumers, and gatekeepers of video games contribute to producing gaming culture. This culture of gaming has traditionally been a male dominated arena, as men held a numerical majority over women in regards to the development, production, and consumption of video games (Cassell and Jenkins 1998; Hartmann and Klimmt 2006; Kafai et al 2008; Kerr 2003; Royse et al 2007). However, with video games becoming more accessible in the 1990s, the numerical majority held by men has decreased, as more women are gaining access to video games. Even so, researchers have discovered through observation a pattern of hypermasculinity persisting within the gamer community, targeting those perceived as other in the community, especially women (Beavis and Charles 2007; Fox and Tang 2014; Salter and Blodgett 2012; Yates and Littleton 1999). This research suggests the gaming community, or the community of video game players, remains based on a culture of male dominance and misogyny.

Research conducted by the Entertainment Software Association (ESA) on gaming culture showed that a large part of the community of gamers are between the ages of 18 and 35, accounting for 30% of the overall population. In terms of gender, women currently represent 44% of gamers (ESA 2015). Despite accounting for almost half of the game playing population, women gamers are an underrepresented and excluded group within the culture, both within the production of games and as consumers (Beavis and Charles 2007; Chess 2010; Taylor et al 2009). The portrayal of women within the games themselves helps to perpetuate this exclusion

(Alloway and Gilbert 1998; Cassell and Jenkins 1998; Fantone 2009; Hartmann and Klimmt 2006; Kafai et al 2008; Ohl and Duncan 2012; Shaw 2014; Taylor et al 2009). Salter and Blodgett (2012) note that women within video games are often portrayed as background characters aiding in the male hero's quest, enemies, objects for pleasure, or play nothing more than the role of background characters. Prior research suggests male gamers exclude women from dominant group activities, question women's legitimacy within the community, and create hostile environments for women both virtually within games and physically when playing in designated gaming spaces (Beavis and Charles 2007; Fox and Tang 2014; Hartmann and Klimmt 2006; Royse et al 2007; Salter and Blodgett 2012; Shaw 2014; Yates and Littleton 1999). Communications research puts forth that male gamers construct boundaries, defining other male gamers as "like them" and distancing from others, specifically women, through hyper-masculine and defensive approaches. As such, women can be understood as holding a subordinated status within the gaming culture and gaming community.

Despite these observations of the status that women gamers hold within the culture, little research has focused on the specific experiences of women gamers, along with how women perceive and negotiate a subordinate status within the gaming community. Mirroring the distinction alluded to by Royse et al (2007) a decade ago, research on women in gaming continues to predominantly fall into two categories. This includes first, examinations of representations of women in games and how such representations influence women playing games (Beasley and Standley 2002; Cruea and Park 2012; Hartmann and Klimmt 2006; Near 2013; Yang et al 2011). The second category includes comparisons between male and female gamers playing styles, interests, and thoughts on games and gaming culture (Cassell and Jenkins 1998; Hartmann and Klimmt 2006; Kerr 2003; Poels et al2012; Schott and Horrell 2000; Taylor

et al 2009; Vermeulen et al 2014; Williams et al 2009; Yang et al 2011; Yates and Littleton 2001). Gaming research that does focus on women gamers tends to examine gender identity from an ethnographic performativity perspective, such as how women gamers act within specific settings like internet cafes and other public gaming hubs (Bevis and Charles 2007). Accordingly, little research has specifically looked to obtain narratives of women gamers and how they construct the identity of gamer. Thus, a gap remains surrounding the ways in which women gamers construct their gamer identity within the current, male dominated gaming culture. Yates and Littleton (2001) argue that in order to achieve a better understanding of the differences between male and female gamers, researchers must first make an effort to determine the ways in which players construct gaming and how that process affects their own sense of self, including their gender identity.

The present research aims to address this gap in the literature through interviews with collegiate women gamers, as prior research indicates that the majority of gamers fall within the average age of collegiate students (ESA 2015). The researcher looks to explore the processes of collegiate women gamers identity construction as grounded in their experiences with the gaming community. This research will look at the ways in which collegiate women gamers draw from, reject, or exclude the current expectations defined for them in the community and in what ways this helps to perpetuate or question women's marginal status within the gaming community. The research question for this study includes: How do participants perform identity work in ways that help define their identity of a "gamer," while negotiating a subordinated status within the larger gaming community due to their gender?

For the purpose of the current study, I will adopt an identity work perspective, expanding on the work of Schwalbe et al (2000) on the reproduction of inequalities through generic social

processes. I will look to see if female gamers perform identity work processes such as defensive othering, subordinate adaptation, and boundary work to situate themselves within the larger gaming community and define the identity of "gamer." I will also draw from associated research by Ezzell (2009: 112) which extended Schwalbe et al.'s (2000) research by adding the processes of (a) "*identified with dominants,"* (b)" normative *identification,"* and (c) *"propping up dominants."* The current project will draw from Ezzel's (2009) research, as his work on marginalized female rugby players' use of generic social processes to aid in their identity management appears theoretically applicable to the context of female gamers. I therefore propose this research will offer, similar to Ezzell (2009), a situated analysis of identity work processes of collegiate female gamers. This research will adopt such a perspective because the current lack of research regarding women in gaming inhibits our understanding of the identity work strategies they utilize, and whether, due to their status within the community, this work is done using processes such as defensive othering and subordinate adaptation to define themselves as gamers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social stereotypes help to perpetuate the understanding of gamers as young, white, heterosexual men, thus defining video games as a male pastime, though gaming studies have found this stereotype to be false (Fox and Tang 2014; Shaw 2014; Williams et al 2008). Men are the central focus in all aspects of gaming, from creating and producing video games to consumption and professional play. The majority of advertisements for video games targets young, white males and the games themselves fit into societies concepts of masculinity: extremely violent, action driven, and heroic (Cruea and Park 2012; Flanagan 2003; Hartmann and Klimmt 2006; Kerr 2003; Shaw 2014). Due to this, women and gaming has gained increased centrality for researchers, specifically focusing on why women are an underrepresented group amongst game players. Many researchers point to the lack of appropriate female representation within video games as the cause behind women's assumed disinterest with gaming. Critics of the female form in games claim that images of women characters are geared towards a male audience, as the characters fall into two categories: (1) passive, secondary characters that fit into the "save the princess" stereotype, or (2) the sexual objects of the male protagonist's lust (Flanagan 2003; Hartmann and Klimmt 2006; Near 2013; Poels et al 2012; Salter and Blodgett 2012).

Researchers and others critically examining the production and consumption of video games have defined this as a "boys" space, and as such, women have found themselves on the fringes of this culture (Burrill 2008; Cassell and Jenkins 2000; Fox and Tang 2014; Hartmann and Klimmt 2006). Male game designers and producers have created games that express masculinity in two interrelated ways: (1) as men, their perspective shapes the game, and (2) as

marketers, with the assumption that the target audience is young men (Chess 2010; Schott and Horrell 2000). These games typically involve violence, puzzles, fantasy, and role playing. Many developers have stated that the inclusion of female characters has been to appeal to male gamers more than female gamers (Schott-Horrell 2000). Some researchers feel that these images of women helped to perpetuate the lack of inclusion of women within the gaming community (Cassell and Jenkins 1998; Hartmann and Klimmt 2006; Schott and Horrell 2000; Royse et al 2007; Salter and Blodgett 2012; Yates and Littleton 1999). Interviews with women have found that this sentiment holds true regarding images, regardless of their level of play, defined as the amount of time per week they play video games (Cruea and Park 2012; Fox and Tang 2014; Norris 2004; Royse et al 2007).

In these ways, prior research regarding women within the gaming culture and community have focused on the representation of women in games and how women differ from male players in terms of play style, interests and thoughts about games and gaming culture. The following section will review the place of women as characters within video games and interactions with technology to offer insight into the gaming culture and community as a gendered space. As this literature is still limited, I therefore will review the literature that has started to address women's gamer identity at the individual level, prior to reviewing gaps in this literature and then turn to the identity work perspective to explore how it can help in addressing these gaps.

Levels of Play

Levels of Play and Female Representation

In relation to levels of play, studies looking at the interactions of women gamers with technology and gaming culture have indicated that there is a clear difference in the experiences

of women based on their level of play (Cruea and Park 2012; Royse et al 2007). Prior research has noted that women tend to play less than their male counterparts and are more likely to underestimate the amount of time they spend playing games (Lucas and Sherry 2004; Shaw 2011); however, contradictory results from studies like Williams et al (2009) found that women played longer, though less frequently, than their male counterparts. Royse et al (2007) through their study on women and computer game consumption, categorized and explained women gamers based on level of play. The authors created three categories to define level of play: (1) power users, or those that play video games 3 or more hours a week; (2) moderate users, or those that play video games 1 to 3 hours a week; and (3) non-users, those that did not play video games.

Power users were more likely to focus on skill mastery within games as opposed to content, though other studies have noted women discussing quality content as something they look for in video games (Hartmann and Klimmt 2006). They (power users) define games based around pleasure, skill mastery, and control over character representation. Moderate gamers focused more on control over environments, understood as deriving from their use of video games for relaxation and escaping from everyday life. Non-users were more likely to have negative outlooks on games, with many citing that games were a waste of energy and were non-productive. Non-users also critiqued women's representation within the games, fearing that it would create negative expectations for women within reality (Royse et al 2007).

Even with these general classifications, for some women this type of representation does not impact their desire to play games, or, additional factors were more influential in their gaming choices (Hartmann and Klimmt 2006; Royse et al 2007). The findings of Hartmann and Klimmt (2006) indicate that women gamers held social interaction in game as more important than the

relevance of gender role stereotyping and violence and were not repelled by video games that portrayed gender stereotyped protagonists. Women who regularly play video games, categorized as power users in some studies, were less likely to be concerned with the representation of female characters (Royse et al 2007). Instead, these women identified with the values held by the majority of the gaming community, such as having high value on their own personal skills, strategies, and power within first person shooter (FPS) games (Beavis and Charles 2007; Lucas and Sherry 2004; Sherry and Lucas 2003; Williams et al 2009). When given a choice, power users sought games that allowed them to control an avatar of their own design. These women would create the avatars that blurred concepts of gender, with the character aesthetically looking feminine and "sexy," yet they would be strong within the battle systems in the game (Beavis and Charles 2007; Eklund 2011). The look of the character for many of the women was a representation of their ideal self, one that embraced femininity but still pushed cultural norms. Royse et al. (2007) felt that this desire to control representation may be linked to player identification and to women's overall pleasure in video game playing. These findings are similar to that of Shaw (2014), whose participants were unconcerned with representation in video games and other forms of media. Instead, when representation was present in games, participants considered it as a nice addition or bonus to the game.

For some women, especially those categorized as non-players, or individuals who do not play video games regularly, the representation of women in video games was a contributing factor to their distaste in games and non-use (Fox and Tang 2014; Hartmann and Klimmt 2006; Norris 2004; Royse et al 2007). These women felt that the overly sexualized images of women in games and other forms of media help to create unrealistic expectations of women on the part of men. Cruea and Park (2012), in contrast to these prior studies, found that women who spend

more time playing video games were more likely to perceive that other women would be negatively influenced by the sexualized images of women in video games. Women who did not play video games at all did not perceive any negative influence on other women. Cruea and Park (2012) argue that women who play games more frequently are more likely to be exposed to hyper-sexualized representations of women, so that this awareness and its impact on others, may keep them from participating further in the gaming community. Based on these findings, it is possible that the identity of "gamer" may be more salient or a greater part of the identity of power users than moderate users, and therefore affect their identity work processes. Beyond this, the seemingly contradictory findings regarding women gamers' perceptions of how women will be negatively influenced by sexualized images of women in video games, additional research is needed to examine the influence of women's levels of play and how they negotiate the impacts of the imagery within games for themselves and others.

Levels of Play and Gender Differences

Many studies have noted differences between men and women in regards to hours spent playing games, access to games, genre preference, and competitiveness (Beavis and Charles 2007; Lucas and Sherry 2004; Royse et al 2007; Schott and Horrell 2000; Williams et al 2009). Many of the women felt that there was a difference in play styles between men and women, which, in some cases, led them to discussions regarding women and appropriateness within the culture, competence, skill, and competitiveness. Multiple studies have noted that women gamers reinforce the idea that games, especially highly violent games, are solely for men (Beavis and Charles 2007; Ohl and Duncan 2012; Royse et al 2007; Yates and Littleton 1999). Despite this, many of the women enjoyed violent games but discussed concerns over how their preferences

would be interpreted by the gaming community, fearing that their femininity would be brought into question (Beavis and Charles 2007; Eklund 2011; Royse et al 2007).

Level of game playing was of importance, as women who were categorized as moderate users in Royse et al (2007) study were more likely to believe that men were more interested and invested in video games. These women also believed that women were, in general, not as good as men at playing video games. Beavis and Charles (2007), in their interviews with women classified as power users, found that for some women, the expectations of game role fall in line with societal gender roles. These women felt that male gamers were more likely to choose aggressive, offensive roles, such as a warrior, while women gamers were more likely to pick support and defense characters, which have the more traditionally feminine values of healing and nurturing. These beliefs regarding different play styles based on gender may allude to the use of the concept of normative values, in that, within the gaming community, women are considered to be less competitive and less competent at game playing than males.

In interviews with female *Counter Strike* players in LAN (Local Area Network) public cafés, Beavis and Charles (2007) found that many of the women enjoyed playing the violent, shooting game, purposefully seeking out different opponents to show off their expertise's. The women of this study where chosen because they played in public, LAN cafés, thus giving them a unique perspective due to them being unable to hide their gender while playing, despite the game being played online. Despite expressing enjoyment of their competitive and achievement oriented natures while playing the FPS game, the women noted that these traits were too violent for a girl. The women discussed gaming through a gendered lens, creating boundaries for what is acceptable for male and female players. While attempting to negotiate their conflicting gamer and gender identities, the women utilized "othered" identities, reaping the benefits of being

called skillful for ‘girl’ gamers, which enabled them to continue to show off their skill within the game (Beavis and Charles 2007: 704). They may be utilizing these othered identities as a way to avoid negative reactions from male players who perceive their interests as too masculine (Vermeulen et al 2014).

Expanding from this, some research has focused on determining why women are an underrepresented group amongst the video game player population. One study found that male counterparts often ignored or sidelined young female gamers in regards to control over gaming equipment (Schott and Horrell 2000). Other studies found that women tend to feel uncomfortable playing video games in public, with these studies suggesting that this is due to the perception that there are social advantages for men who are skilled in video games, while skilled female game players are viewed as taboos within society (Bryce and Rutter 2003; Laurel 2003). Despite these factors, video game manufactures have consistently tried to bring in female players using targeted advertising, specific coloring of products, and specific genres of games.

Packaging and genre of video games have also been a topic of contention in regards to bringing more female players into the community. The “Girls’ Game Movement”, a movement in the 1990s that focused on targeting female gamers with community building and non-violent games all wrapped in pink packaging, was critiqued for creating stronger gendered divisions amongst gamers (Cassell and Jenkins 1998; Graner Ray 2004; Yates and Littleton 1999). Yates and Littleton’s (1999) interviews with women gamers found that many viewed the “Girls’ Game Movement” as a retro concept, with some mentioning that the concepts regarding female mentality are likened to the 1950s housewife. However, this mentality regarding “girl games” is still found within the community, as male gamers consider female gamers who prefer more

masculine games, specifically those with a combat element, as out of the norm within the community (Beavis and Charles 2007; Vermeulen et al 2014).

Finding that women may have difficulty negotiating gender identities, even while benefiting from being seen as skillful for "girl" gamers (Beavis and Charles 2007) is consistent with other studies showing women gamers perceptions of each other. Taylor et al's (2009) interviews with women at a large gaming conference showed how women gamers perceived other women gamers' roles within the gaming community. An interview with a female gamer using the online name Fatal Fantasy (Fatal) helped revel how this participant tried to distinguish herself from other women who were in attendance at the gaming conference. Fatal made mention that she was not like the other women, claiming that she was not a "Halo Ho" or women who attended the conference to pick up male gamers for romantic or sexual reasons. She claimed that she was there "for the right reasons, i.e. 'just to game.'" (Taylor et al 2009: 245).
Some of the participants, however, found alternative ways to negotiate their gendered gamer identity. They discussed how women were not as good at video games as men while using masculine terms and concepts to discuss their interest in *Counter Strike*, specifically terms rooted in violence and competition. This is similar to the findings of Yates and Littleton (1999: 579), who found that women participants negotiated their level of play, stating that they "were but were not" active game players, with many women discussing their active use of games while stressing that they do not organize gaming sessions with their peers. This finding may contribute to our understanding of the identity work of woman gamers such as how they were introduced to video games and the gaming community.

Though current gaming literature has focused on the experiences of women gamers from a performativity perspective and in regards to differences between men and women players, a

gap remains in regards to the "gamer" identity, specifically one defined by women players. My study will draw from an identity work perspective to examine the ways in which women gamer's marginalized status within the gaming community is interrelated with their identity work construction and the ways they interact with the gaming community and culture.

Identity Work and the Reproduction of Inequality in Gaming

In order to examine these gaps surrounding how women negotiate gamer identities in this gendered context, this research will draw from the identity work perspective.

Review of Identity Work

The identity work perspective, as coined by Snow and Anderson (1987) and specifically developed by Schwalbe and Schrock (1996: 120), is defined as "anything people do, either individually or collectively, to give meaning to themselves or others." The identity work perspective is based in the larger framework of symbolic interactionism and interactionist identity perspectives. The symbolic interactionist perspective, as coined by Blumer (1969) has three premises: (1) human beings interact with objects, (2) meanings are given to objects through social interactions between individuals, and (3) the meanings of objects are changed through an interpretive, reflexive process utilized by the individual when interacting with the object. Blumer (1969) defines an object as anything that can be referred to, such as physical objects, an individual, or abstract thought. Blumer argues that an individual has a self due to them being able to identify and interact with themselves as an object. In this way, the individual as well as others have the ability to socially interact, thus helping to shape an individual's concept of self. From a symbolic interactionist perspective identities have traditionally been viewed as being constructed forms of joint action (Blumer 1969; Strauss 1959), in which meanings of the self are negotiated

through interactional processes with each other. Goffman (1959), building from this tradition, developed the idea of the dramaturgical perspective on identity. In this dramaturgical perspective, social interactions are performances in which a person communicates their self-concept, which is then signified to and then affirmed or disaffirmed by others, as well as reflexively to the self (Goffman 1959). From an identity work perspective more specifically, joint action, according to Schwalbe and Schrock (1996), is needed in order for identities to be successfully signified, as it is necessary for others to accept and support the identity work performed by the individual.

Accordingly, identities are created and negotiated through different types of "work" through social interaction. Identities, in this sense, are not static, but rather "indexes of the self," or signs that individuals and groups utilize in order to elicit meanings from the responses of those that interpret it (Schwalbe and Schrock 1996). As referenced in relation to joint action, "work" can be done at multiple levels, including individually, where a person signifies who and what they are through dramaturgical action, and collectively, where group work occurs "to create signs, codes, and rites of affirmation that become shared resources for identity making" (Schwalbe and Schrock 1996:121). The ways in which a group helps to create and respond to established "identity codes," or the rules by which a person can signify their membership within or across groups, may be used by a person at the individual level in order to affirm or establish their own identities. This process can occur by affirming similarities with and/or contrasting from a group, helping to define groups and individuals by what they are not (Schwalbe and Schrock 1996).

Schwalbe et al (2000), in their analysis of interactionist research, identified four processes from a generic social process perspective that they determined contributed to the

reproduction of inequalities. Social processes, in this case taking from Prus (1996), are defined as "how people do things together-in particular, those things that are endemic to and pervasive in a form of social life" (Schwalbe et al, 2000, pg. 420). Schwalbe et al (2000, pg. 421) specify that generic, within this context, implies that the process can occur within "multiple contexts wherein social actors face similar or analogous problems." The four processes concluded from their analysis were: *subordinate adaptation, othering, boundary maintenance,* and *emotion management.* Schwalbe et al. (2000, pg. 422) proposed that these "transsituationally occurring processes" are key forms of join action, showing the ways in which inequalities are reproduced within "small groups, complex organizations, communities, and societies."

Schwalbe et al. (2000) defined *Othering* as a process performed by subordinates to other members of the subordinate group as an adaptive strategy or reaction to the oppressive identity codes imposed by the dominant group. *Subordinate adaptation* is defined as the process utilized by individuals who try to cope with the disadvantages that come with holding a subordinate status. The process in which dominants create boundaries between themselves and the subordinate group is termed *boundary maintenance.* Through this process, dominant groups are able to limit subordinates access to resources. The final process, termed *emotion management,* is defined as the regulation of emotions amongst the dominates in order to maintain inequalities between the two groups. For the purposes of the proposed research, these processes will be used during analysis as coding categories.

As the current research looks to understand the way women gamers' negotiate and manage their gender and gamer identities, it is important to understand the different methods of identity work used to negotiate gendered identities. Wilkins's (2012) study analyzed the ways black women use intimate storytelling regarding interracial relationships as a tool in their

identity work negotiations to maintain group membership with fellow collegiate, black women. Wilkins (2012) argues that meaningful storytelling and the content of the stories can be used to claim and maintain group membership, as the stories allows for the management of group identity codes and boundaries. Storytelling draws from widely held expectations, such as those surrounding gender, to establish selves – either created or perceived as "real – in order to signify and maintain group membership." As seen in Ezzel's (2009) interviews with collegiate, female rugby players, traditional femininity was both drawn from and pushed away from as the women negotiated their intersectional rugby and gender identities. He expands on the work of Schwalbe et al. (2000) by adding two additional subcategories of defensive othering. These sub-categories are: *identified with dominants*, in which subordinates identify with the values associated with the dominant groups, and *normative identification*, in which subordinates identify with the normative values the dominant group has established for subordinate group members. Ezzell (2009, pg.124) found that these collegiate women rugby players (ruggers), who embraced the hyper masculine and violent nature of rugby, used defensive othering in order to distance themselves from the label of "butch lesbians." In turn, their defensive othering contributed to their construction of a particular identity Ezzell (2009) termed "heterosexy fit," which helped to reinforced the heterosexist ideology of the rugby community. Although these generic processes have yet to be examined within gaming research, findings from prior gamer research suggests the applicability of such generic processes.

As the women of the current study are negotiating their gender and gamer identities, it is possible that their stories regarding their experiences with the gaming community draw from or push back against expectations held of gamers and stereotypes of masculinity and femininity to maintain group membership. Accordingly, I will use an identity work perspective to examine in

what ways women draw from identity work processes established through prior research, and more specifically, whether such practices reproduce inequalities within the gaming culture. At the same time, analysis on women gamers' identity work at the individual level regarding the management of their identities as both women and gamers may bring new insight to the ways in which the "gamer" identity is constructed and whether it fosters or resists the marginalization of women. This, in turn, may lead to identifying new forms of identity work that can contribute to our understanding of identity negotiation processes. The proposed research will utilize collegiate female gamers, as college students are more likely to be gamers and due to the nature of college campuses in regards to identity work (Ford 2011; Wilkins 2012).

METHODS

To address the gaps in the literature, this study conducted semi-structured interviews with collegiate, women gamers in order to see how women negotiate their gamer and gender identities and what identity work processes they use. Interviews were conducted through the Summer 2016 and Fall 2016 semesters, while data were analyzed in the Spring 2017 semester. The current research was guided by the following research question: How do participants perform identity work in ways that help define their identity of a "gamer," while negotiating a subordinated status within the larger gaming community due to their gender?

Participants

A total of 12 self-identified women gamers were interviewed from July 2016 to October 2016. The sample was recruited from a large, southeastern university through the university's social and academic clubs. The author contacted presidents of clubs that appeared connected with the research (e.g. based on club names, descriptions, etc.) through email; for those interested, the researcher attended a designated meeting to explain the research and recruit. Additional participant recruitment used social media platforms intended for university students and through paper flyers in university approved locations on campus. Approval from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) was obtained prior to the start of the study and all participants were given consent forms prior to the start of the interview (See Appendix A). Participants were only allowed to participate if they met the following criteria, as explained through the consent form: were 18 years of age or older, identified as a gamer, played online with other gamers, and identified as female. Participants meeting the requirements were voluntarily interviewed one-on-one at predetermined locations coordinated by the participant and

researcher with all interviews being conducted by the author. Participants were informed that they could opt out of the study at any time should they wish to stop participation. Demographic information was collected by the researcher prior to the interviews through demographic sheets completed by the participants (see Appendix B). These data were kept separate from other information and was stored in a password protected document. Table 1 (below) denotes the assigned pseudonym, age, ethnicity, class, year in school, hours of game playing a week, and the age at which participants started playing video games. In regards to the variable income, participants were asked to best describe their family's income by choosing from five income categories: Far above average, above average, average, below average, and far below average. Participants could also choose a "Don't Know" option.

Table 1 – Demographic Characteristics

Pseudonym	**Age**	**Year in School**	**Major/Minor**	**Race**	**Income**	**Age Began Playing Video Games**	**Hours/Week Playing Video Games.**
Sarah	20	Junior	Character Animation	White	Average	8	8
Kayla	20	Junior	Biomedical Sciences/ Chemistry, Health Science	White	Above Average	9	2
Alex	29	Ph. D	Sociology	Multi	Above Average	10	3
Lisa	27	Senior	Biology/ Anthropology	Hispanic	Average	5	25
Tara	20	Masters	Sociology/ GIS	White	Average	3	25
Samantha	23	Masters	Digital Media	White	Far Above Average	5	12

Krista	25	Masters	Computer Science	White	Far Above Average	13	30
Gina	20	Sophomore	Microbiology	White	Above Average	12	42
Natalie	20	Junior	Communication Sciences	White	Above Average	5	25
Pseudonym	**Age**	**Year in School**	**Major/Minor**	**Race**	**Income**	**Age Began Playing Video Games**	**Hours/Week Playing Video Games.**
Tina	20	Junior	Computer Engineer/ Digital Media Game Design	White	Don't Know	7	10
Rachel	19	Sophomore	Biomedical Sciences	Multi	Below Average	6	5
Morgan	24	Senior	Psychology/ Political Science	Multi	Above Average	7	12

Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were held by the author at secure locations on university property as coordinated by the author and participant. Interview question were grounded around the research questions, targeting individual's identity work processes through their experiences as gamers (See Appendix C for interview schedule). The majority of interviews lasted forty-five minutes with some interviews going over an hour. Each interview was audio recorded, with the participant's consent, and saved to a password protected computer only accessible by the author.

Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed on a rolling basis, as each interview was completed. Brief memos were taken prior to and directly preceding interviews to improve interview

questions and note any trends amongst participants. Data were analyzed using a direct content analysis method. The directed content analysis method is described as using analytical codes derived from existing theories to review the data (Berg 2009). After data were collected and transcribed, initial coding began. Line-by-line, directed coding was used to quickly look for applicable predetermined generic processes (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). The researcher drew from the works of Schwalbe et al (2000) and Ezzell (2009) on generic social processes, using the established processes as the coding categories through the first round of analysis. After the direct coding was complete, axial coding, or intensive coding around singular categories, began with a focus on the pre-established generic processes codes and continued until the data were fully coded and codes were salient (Berg 2009).

Through this process, constant comparison was used throughout the analysis to determine emergent themes and how they compare and contrasted amongst participants and in relation to the prior literature. Additional rounds of coding were then performed to establish if codes where analytically distinct. Open coding development was also used in order to allow for the possibility of new types of identity work or other important components to the identity negotiation process to occur organically. Through this constant comparison, it was determined that while certain forms of generic social processes, such as othering and subordinate adaptation were present, an important negotiation occurred between strictly establishing themselves as a gamer and in the process of addressing stereotypes. Further coding occurred to understand when established processes were discussed by participants, which were found particularly relevant in relation to negotiating stereotypes – especially that of "girl gamer." Alternatively, identity codes established by the gaming community, that can appear to be gender-neutral, were used by participants to establish themselves as gamers, such as by the amount of time spent playing and learning video

games. Through this process, it was determined that rather than a dichotomy of "gendered" and "genderless" negotiations, the participants' drawing from established identity codes in the process of defining themselves and maintain the desired identity of "gamer" led to a process of using identity codes that may face greater or lesser push back in relation to gendered stereotypes.

In addition to this process, a quantitative approach to content analysis was used to determine the frequency of types of identity work across interviews. For each interview, counts were taken for the final codes in order to see which forms of identity work a participant used most frequently, if at all. Comparisons were then drawn between interviews to establish trends across identity work processes and the ways in which they are similar and different across participants.

Reflexive Statement

This project started as a means to understand gamers' experiences with the gaming community, as I, through my own experiences as woman gamer found noticeable differences between myself and other women gamers. I started to wonder how the interactions women gamers had with their fellow gamers impacted their behaviors and concepts of self while gaming. When reviewing my own gaming behavior which spans over 19 years, I noticed differing experiences than that of other woman. I, unlike some of the women I knew, play with all men; a group of six men and myself. We have been playing video games with each other over the past seven years. I had never perceived any mistreatment from them because of my gender and I consider them good friends and teammates. However, similar to my peers but to a far lesser degree, I have also experienced the men that assume I'm incompetent at games because of my gender, but this was generally done in a physical setting, such as gaming bars, and not in online,

virtual spaces. I began to wonder just how different my experiences were from other women gamers and how these experiences shaped the way they interacted with games, the gaming community, and themselves as gamers.

When reflecting upon myself throughout the research process, it was clear to me that my experiences as a women gamer influenced not only my interviews but also my analysis. When interviewing, I used my gaming knowledge to further questioning with participants, attempting to draw upon my understanding of the game and its gameplay elements to tailor questions that would touch on specific experiences central to their game of choice. For example, my understanding of the game World of Warcraft allowed me to have a detailed conversation with one of the participants about her raid group and their general routines, giving insights into the ways in which she spent her time gaming and the rules and expectations that come with being in a raiding team. This did come with the risk of being ignorant of my own knowledge and ignoring the needs to clarify any gaming jargon, games, and processes. I, during the transcription process, notated any jargon and clarified it, using it later throughout my writings as a reminder to explain these terms within the paper.

While analyzing the data, I became aware of my own insider knowledge and biases, especially in regards to the participants that were utilizing the subordinate group identity codes to gain gamer group membership. A comment from my thesis committee regarding my initial reactions to the women made me reflect upon my analysis of the data. As a women gamer, I realized I was fearful of what I assumed would be repercussions for not only myself but for other women gamers because of their actions. I feared this behavior would allow other gamers to discredit me because of my gender, echoing the concerns of other participants. As a researcher, I found it incredibly interesting the varying ways in which women navigated their gaming

experiences and I realized that although I may not agree with the actions of the women, it was still important to understand their reasoning and to be the proper facilitator of their voice throughout this project. By reflecting on my initial reactions I was able to better understand myself as a women gamer, giving potential insights into other women gamers, such as those, like myself, who have found a comfortable gaming group, but may still find themselves having negative experiences with the general gaming community.

FINDINGS

These findings demonstrate how women gamers negotiate a gendered gamer identity, as women hold a marginalized status in the gaming community (Beavis and Charles 2007; Royse et al 2007; Shaw 2014; Yates and Littleton 1999). The analysis draws from Schwalbe et al (2000) generic social processes research to explore the ways in which the participants perform identity work, including boundary maintenance and othering, to situate themselves within the larger gaming community and define the identity of "gamer."

For the purposes of the current study, identity is viewed from an identity work perspective. Drawing from Blumer (1969), individuals are able to interact and identify with themselves as an object. As such, individuals as well as others have the ability to socially interact, shaping an individual's self-concept in the process. Goffman (1959), using a dramaturgical perspective, argues that individuals perform their self-concept to others, which is then affirmed or disaffirmed by others, and reflexively to the self. These forms of joint action are needed in order for identities to be signified due to the necessity of others to accept and support the identity work performed by the individual (Blumer 1969; Strauss 1959; Schwalbe and Schrock 1996). Schwalbe and Schrock (1996) argue that identities are signs used by individuals and groups in order to elicit meanings from the responses of those that interpret it. These signs, or identity codes, are then used by groups as a way to affirm group membership.

I will first discuss how the participants defined themselves as members of the gaming community, or the identity codes they use to define themselves as gamers. I will then discuss how the participants negotiated their gendered gamer identity, as the participants built their gamer identity around their similarities or differences with their perceived view of "girl gamer"

stereotypes, which are prevalent within the gaming community, and the impacts of these stereotypes on their gaming experience.

Examination of participant data found that all of the participants defined themselves as gamers through different forms of commitment. When discussing themselves as gamers, two of the participants focused on their time commitment to their games. Four of the participants discussed commitment in terms of knowledge and skill with six women noting both time and knowledge/skill as core to their gamer identity. Similar to prior research, the participants valued skilled, knowledgeable players and held these expectations for themselves and others (Beavis and Charles 2007; Schott and Horrell 2000).

I will then discuss the gendered obstacles and negative stereotypes the participants described and how they are tied to the gamer identity traits. Despite having a clear sense of themselves as gamers, many of the participants reported encountering gendered obstacles and stereotypes within the community. This is similar to the findings of Beavis and Charles (2007) who found that women *Counter Strike* players felt that their skills were consistently challenged by male players within the community. Similar to prior research, the participants also evoked different strategies to uphold their gamer identity and to gain group membership within the gaming community (Beavis and Charles 2007; Taylor et al 2009). However, this research expands on prior research by applying an identity work perspective to gain better understanding of the processes by which women gamers appropriate or distance themselves from the negative stereotypes to uphold their gamer identity.

Gamer Traits

Time – The Essence of Gaming.

Time has been relevant to other studies, such as how female participants "level of play" (i.e. the amount of hours per week they invested in video games) impacts their feelings towards video games and female representation in games (Royse et al 2007). The current study, however, contributes to prior focus on time, in that rather than only using time as demographic data, time was examined from an identity standpoint. Time was allowed to be organically discussed by participants, and as such, it helped reveal that participants defined themselves as gamers around their time commitment.

Time was discussed by nearly all participants, with eight of the twelve women discussing it as core to what defines them as a gamer. The participants did not report having experiences in which their time commitment was treated as a gendered, gaming trait— nor did the participants frame time in a gendered manner. Alex sums this up simply:

> Well I consider myself a gamer because I spend time playing video games, which, I think, is the essence of it.

Morgan felt similarly, stating "Well I guess I define myself as a gamer by the amount of hours that I put into gaming." Gina describes herself as a gamer that "spends an extensive amount of my time" playing video games and Krista plays video games "every single day"; Natalie states that she "plays games very frequently" and that it is her "hobby." Samantha discusses time as a tool to also assess other gamers stating that "somebody that puts the majority of their time into playing video games. To me that would be a gamer."

The women participants reported spending on average 16 hours a week playing video games. Time, as understood as a form of commitment, is rather straightforward, as the amount of time invested can be understood as an implicit form of dedication to a game. Other gamer identity codes, such as knowledge and skill, were also discussed by participants in terms of commitment, as individuals dedicate their time in game to gain expertise. Although these women did not discuss time as being an obstacle for them, knowledge and skill were reported to be used as gendered stereotypes against women gamers by members of the gaming community.

Knowledge and Skill

All of the women participants discussed knowledge or skill in some manner. Across participants, knowledge and skill were framed as essential to their gamer status and they use these traits to gauge both themselves and others as gamers. Participants discussed knowledge in terms of mechanics, gaming content, and canonical stories from the game themselves. It should be understood, however, that expertise in these areas is linked to the overall investment placed in gaming. While participants initially defined knowledge in these ways, as will be discussed in this section, they went on to describe the obstacles faced when they attempted to signify these identity codes. For example, women described how a trait of the girl gamer stereotype – incompetency- was used against them in a way that directly contradicts the traits they used to define themselves and others as gamers.

For participants like Lisa, knowledge was discussed as simply being the amount of game content the player has experienced:

> Like I play all different types of games. There's not just one game…you know some people call themselves gamers but they only play Call of Duty.

Other participants, like Tara, discussed knowledge and skill in terms of the mechanics of the game:

> Inherently anybody can watch a game and repeat what they see. But very few people can play the game and understand the inner workings of why it happens.

Sarah reiterated this point:

> I am very interested in learning the game and its mechanics instead of just playing it and being like why did that happen?

For players like Gina having knowledge of the mechanics can be used to try and match a certain numerical average, which can be used to assess skill:

> It's really just all about the numbers…if you can express these numbers and generally you want them to be really high or really low…You want numbers that match up to the average of the community. Or go a little above and beyond.

Though knowledge of the games inner workings and numerical algorithms made these women feel successful as players, other women gamers, like Lisa, focused on learning roles particular to their games:

> If I play any type of like role-playing game where you do multi-player, I try to be like the best I can at that particular job or that role and it kinda pushes me to do it better each time.

These distinctions between role and mechanics can be understood as related to the overall commitment a player has to their game. For example, it is easier to know your character's equipment and skills before learning the numerical values, or stats, that the character has and how each skill and piece of equipment impacts these scores. The player could then use this knowledge of the characters when versing another player. If they know the character, they can

then counter more effectively. Knowledge can be viewed on a sliding scale of this nature, even if they vary based on the types of games being played, due to factors like number of players or types of game play. Each of these components can help explain why knowledge is discussed in varying, yet interconnected ways.

Knowledge was not only discussed in terms of the games inner workings but also in regards to the canonical story of the game itself. For Morgan, being knowledgeable of the lore made her feel more connected to the gaming community:

> I guess I define myself [as part of the gaming community] because I have knowledge of certain aspects of the gaming community. I could go on about Grand Theft Auto for days.

As most video games tell a story, some players use this knowledge to determine another player's authenticity as a fan of the game. For example, Tara, a long time player of World of Warcraft (WoW), discusses her frustrations with other players' lack of lore knowledge:

> Most people would be like, "oh yeah, she's a dead lord, "discussing a lead female character in the WoW canon. "Well why?" "Because so and so told me." You're not a gamer man. You have to know the lore. You have to know who said it.

Tara describes herself as a "former raid leader," the highest position within a raid group or a team of players who co-operate to defeat large enemies and compete against other raid groups. As someone who has been in a high level position, is a long time player, and is highly active within the online community of the game, Tara is someone who is very dedicated to her game and expresses this through explaining the standards to which she holds others in the community, reflective of and revealing broader gaming community identity codes of expertise. It is clear that these women view knowledge as crucial to their gamer identity. Such knowledge also helps to

reveal their dedication to the gaming community, as this overlaps with time and attention to gaining expertise above and beyond what might otherwise be deemed a typical hobby.

"Girl Gamer": Negative Stereotypes for Women Who Game

In these ways, women defined the core of their gamer identities as based in forms of commitment: time, or the amount of time invested which can be understood as an implicit form of dedication to a game, along with the knowledge that is required to be adept. Through the experiences of the participants, we can understand these two traits as distinguishing "real" gamers, as they not only spend time playing but dedicate the time to building proficiency in the game.

However, negative stereotypes, like the "girl gamer" stereotype, which marks women as being incompetent, made the women feel as if their gamer status was consistently challenged. Similar to prior research, the women participants have experiences with gendered stereotypes and their stories reveal that they perceive these stereotypes as influential to women's participation with the gaming community (Beavis and Charles 2000; Cassell and Jenkins 1998; Yates and Littleton 1999). As based in an identity work perspective, identities are constructed through the successful signifying of traits associated with the identities. The traits, or identity codes, must be known and then accepted by others for successful signification of a desired identity. In making sense of how these obstacles are built on the core identity codes of gamers, one must first look at the differing types of traits that are being used against women gamers. Aspects of women gamers as being incompetent, as poor teammates, as undedicated, and, from a societal standpoint, as unheard of within gaming, are traits that can be easily questioned by other gamers due to them being more subjective traits verses objective traits, such as time and score.

The “gamer girl” stereotype, as well as other negative assessments of female players by the community, have created a gendered expectation for women looking to participate within the online gaming community. Though some of the women discussed feeling pressures from a non-gendered standpoint, such as not having as much time to game due to work or school, ten of the women participants discussed feeling pressured by these gendered expectations which seemed to focus on skill and knowledge. Interestingly, these expectations build from the gender-neutral explanations discussed prior but, due to these stereotypes pressuring these key parts of their gamer identity, the women gamers felt they needed additional markers of determination and expertise in order to be considered by the gaming community.

To understand the influences of the gamer girl stereotype, I will first review how women broadly describe the negative stereotypes. I then touch on the few women who embraced the girl gamer stereotype in order to better understand the traits women appropriated to uphold their gamer community membership. However, this behavior can be understood as trading power for patronage, or identifying with the identity codes prescribed to the marginalized group by the dominant group in order to gain acceptance, which can have the effect of perpetuating the stereotypes. Last, I review the primary forms by which women combated the stereotypes; while this was generally done through gaming performance, othering was also used. However, this process also perpetuates stereotypes by claiming that “other” women may fulfill them.

Defining Negative Stereotypes. Gaming performance, or how well a person plays the game, was described as a gendered obstacle by the participants. The women discussed feeling as if other gamers immediately expected them to be worse than men gamers and, as such, if they were to prove they belonged in the community, then they must out-perform others, which is similar to the findings of Beavis and Charles (2007). Natalie discussed her experience as follows:

> Ok well first you have to be better at the games than average because otherwise people won't take you seriously.

Rachel felt that the expectations from the gaming community were linked to the societal view of gaming and gamers:

> I feel like they [male gamers] probably expect more out of us because it's generally accepted for a guy to be playing but for a girl to be playing it's a little bit different. So maybe they expect us to be a little better at it. So if you come in and you're a woman and you just started playing a game and you're really bad at it then they are going to bash you a lot more.

Kayla expressed feeling pressure from her gaming team:

> I was just playing to have fun. I feel like within the ranks they expected the women to kind of be harder to match up with the men.

Kayla goes on to explain that she no longer plays within the ranks, or with her online competitive team, due to these expectations. However, as women gamers are not given a middle ground like their male counterparts, they are held accountable for their level of skill and knowledge regardless of their actual expertise. Thus, some of the participants, like Lisa, discussed the stereotype as placing women in extremes, with women being held to lower standards:

> If they don't [hold you to a higher expectation] they hold us to a low standard like oh she's a female. She doesn't know what she's doing in game.

This holds true for the experiences of other women gamers in the study, such as Samantha, who echoes the "girl gamer" stereotype when explaining "girls are not expected to be good gamers." Overall, women felt other gamers generally responded to them as being incompetent when compared to other players. When discussing these reactions, women at times specified that it

came from male gamer. Arguably, when they did not specify and discussed these comments as coming from a generic "them," they are still referencing a "typical" player, or one that is male.

It should be noted that these women discuss these expectations not as arising from a singular experience with a member of the community but as a general force that is reproduced and bolstered by members of the gaming community. This force is so generalized that Alex, who plays online with both male and female avatars, felt that the community expectations were "lower in terms of skill level" when she played as her female avatar as opposed to when she plays her male avatar. This shows that gamers will use any gender markers available and, when they are feminized, will apply the same gendered expectations and stereotypes whether it is in the game or in real life.

Adopting Stereotypes

Participant data showed that the women gamers felt challenged by members of the gaming community in regards to their gaming abilities. Additionally, because gaming has been traditionally male, women are sometimes viewed as participating for the wrong reasons, which has been termed the "gamer girl" stereotype. This stereotype frames women gamers as unskilled players who are only playing in order to gain male attention (Taylor et al. 2009). Despite this, some of the participants adopted the term "girl gamer" in order to help them fit into the community. Schwalbe et al (2000) termed this behavior as trading power for patronage, or accepting a subordinate status in order to gain benefits from dominant group members. For example, Morgan, adopted the term "girl gamer" as a way to fit in:

> Because I feel like the term girl gamer was socially constructed by a guy, personally. So I feel like if they accept that term like maybe, you know, it will bring them closer to the

> other gamers and I used to define myself as a girl gamer…So I used to use that term like oh maybe if I call myself a girl gamer, maybe I'll be accepted into it.

It appears that Morgan adopted the term due to her view that the term was created by men and thus would be something that the males within the community would be looking for out of women gamers. It does not appear that she viewed the term as inherently derogatory, but rather purposed it as a means of gaining acceptance from the male members of the community. Samantha, who also adopted the term at one point, did so because she "liked the attention it gave me," though she notes that it may be due to her being "young and attention seeking." Similar to Samantha, Natalie adopted the stereotype because it brought her positive benefits she felt she otherwise wouldn't receive:

> Well I'm using it to my advantage as a YouTuber. It brings more attraction but the important thing is to like not have that be your only standpoint. It could be a draw, like something that draws people in.

Interestingly, despite adopting the term, Natalie does not want others to assume she fits the stereotype. She is explicit in stating that she doesn't want other gamers to view her channel only for her femininity but she wants to "keep them for other reasons," such as her gaming ability. Natalie, in this way, is taking the term "girl gamer" and appropriating it; defining the term in her own way and using it as a way to advance the popularity of her YouTube channel. Even though the adoption of these stereotypes has allowed these women to gain net benefits, termed trading power for patronage by Schwalbe et al (2000), it may cause the perpetuation of the gendered stereotypes. Both Samantha and Natalie still do not fully embrace the term; while each discuss the term in association with attention, the packaging of this trait as one of many or youthful constructs the trait as a double-edged stereotype. This perpetuates potentially negative

stereotypes, as it could be viewed that the use of femininity to draw attention, as opposed to just gaming skill, continues the view that women are only participating in gaming for non-gaming activities, such as male attention.

Combating Stereotypes.

With gender being so salient in the gaming community some of the women gamers have turned to othering, described by Schwalbe et al (2000) as an adaptive strategy used by subordinate group members against other members of the subordinate group. This othering predominantly drew from the negative stereotype that women are only playing to gain male attention, similar to prior research, such as with the gamer Fatal Fantasy (Fatal), who othered women gamers at a gaming convention because Fatal felt they were attending to get boyfriends (Taylor et al 2009). Tara explains this by comparing women gamers to "girl gamers":

> So a gamer who's a girl is somebody who's proven herself worthy or knows enough or has a working knowledge. The girl gamers, to me, end up being the ones who are just doing it to get attention from guys.

Rachel, Natalie, Gina, and Samantha all expressed something similar to Tara, stating that these "girl gamers" have a "look at me" (Samantha, Gina) attitude and "they don't know anything about the game" they are playing (Natalie) and that they "are trying to impress men" (Rachel). This othering by the participants perpetuates the idea that women gamers are acting in this manner, reinforcing boundaries by placing themselves within the community through defining traits of other women. By distinguishing themselves from these "other" women gamers, it may give the participants a sense of legitimacy, as they fit the norms of the gamming community.

Gina, however, performed othering against women gamers who she feels are attempting to change traditionally maintained rules within the gaming community:

> Yeah but the women I've heard from [regarding their experiences gaming online] tend to be a little more on the SJW (Social Justice Warrior) side of things. So, I tend to think they're exaggerating or they feel like they were edged out here when really they just weren't doing their part [or the expectations held of them regarding their role in game]. A lot of - more often than not they [other players] don't want you there cause you're not doing your job. It's just like any hobby, you know, if you're going to go into gardening club and your plants are dying…they're not going to want you there.

As Gina appears to identify strongly with the values held of the community, such as being knowledgeable and skillful in one's game, her opposition to women break the established norms within the community makes sense. Gina uses these values as a way to express her gamer credibility to other members and thus these women pose a threat to the structure in which Gina has been able to establish herself.

Although these women discussed feeling confident in their gaming knowledge, they discussed the gendered expectations as posing a challenge to others accepting their desired gamer identity. Thus, many of the women turned to additional strategies in order to combat these stereotypes or to have a better gaming experience online. Some women combated the stereotypes by proving their skill in game, keeping sharp on their current gaming knowledge, or like Alex, for example, using avatars as a way to navigate these expectations:

> I have one avenue in which I present myself as a female but I have another avenue in which I present myself as a male online. So if I'm like ever serious about, you know,

> something in the game, I might, depending on what I'm feeling; I will present myself one way or another.

When asked why she does this, she explained that, "I use that in order to not get hit on or to be taken seriously." In this way, through the gender presentation of her avatar, Alex is able to navigate the community in order to create the best experience for herself. Such actions reflect social perceptions held about gaming, as men who are actively visible playing games gain advantages, whereas visible women gamers tend to be viewed as taboos (Bryce and Rutter 2003; Laurel 2003). Samantha and Rachel also felt that their presence was questioned due to their gender, discussing situations where they were in the company of a male friend and found their presence in games being questioned before their male friends were, showing the impact of the gendered stereotypes held within the gaming community.

Alternatively, other women either did not have the resource of an avatar or felt the need to take on the stereotype explicitly, such as Natalie, who showed off her gaming abilities to confront the negative stereotypes held of them:

> I feel like it's stereotypical that females are worse than males at gaming so I have to prove that wrong. I have to go the extra mile to show no, I'm better. No, I'm better than you. I'm good.

Lisa felt similarly:

> You always kind of feel like you have to prove yourself to them because it feels kind of like you almost don't belong in this world.

Lisa's feelings are similar to prior research findings that showed women gamers reinforced the idea that video games, especially violent games, are solely a male activity (Beavis and Charles 2007; Ohl and Duncan 2012; Royse et al 2007; Yates and Littleton 1999). Other women gamers,

such as Tina, proved herself by “literally gaming as hard as possible” and Morgan always felt as if she “had to outdo” herself. Sarah, however, proved herself to others by “reading the patch notes” and through her speech:

> Whenever I meet someone new I would use proper terms and just be like much more active with my information just to kind of let them know that I do know what I’m talking about. Take me seriously.

This consistent desire to prove themselves, to be the best gamer they can, shows that these women wish to be taken seriously by the gaming community at any cost. As they are consistently judged and held to high standards due to their gender, these women work to go above and beyond to meet these expectations in the hopes of successfully signifying their gamer group membership, gaining confirmation by other members of the community. These actions, even if not directly related to defending their gamer identity, still worked towards gaining acceptance from the gaming community.

DISCUSSION

These findings focus on experiences of women gamers and how they negotiate their gender and gamer identities while holding a marginalized status within the gaming community. Current gaming literature, when discussing women gamers has been limited to a performativity perspective on women's gaming experiences as well as the gender differences between gamers (Cassell and Jenkins 1998; Royse et al 2007; Schott and Horrell 2000; Yates and Littleton 1999).

In contrast, the current study looks at women gamers' identity construction, with specific focus on their defined "gamer" identity. Additionally, this research explores the areas in which women gamers feel their gamer identities are challenged by gendered obstacles put forth by the gaming community. Upholding to prior research, this study found that women gamers hold similar values to those held by the larger gaming community as well as encountering the negative stereotypes held of women gamers by the community (Beavis and Charles 2007; Schott and Horrell 2000). However, by adopting an identity work perspective, this research was able to uncover how women gamers define and negotiate these stereotypes to uphold their gamer membership, revealing that women gamers enact the social processes of "othering" and "subordinate adaptation," as defined by Schwalbe et al (2000), which helps to perpetuate their marginalized status within the gaming community as these processes uphold the negative identity codes associated with the marginalized group.

The women gamers discussed their gamer identities from a perspective of commitment. In this way, they were able to discuss clear points by which they define the gamer "identity codes," or, the rules by which a person can signify their membership within or across groups (Schwalbe and Schrock 1996). The participants' gamer identities were strongly tied to their time

commitment to gaming as well as becoming knowledgeable and skilled at video games. However, many of the women gamers found these traits, or identity codes, as being challenged by the gaming community, using them as gendered weapons to uphold boundaries of who is accepted as a real gamer or not. This behavior was noted in prior research by Beavis and Charles (2007), where male gamers create gendered expectations and negative stereotypes claiming women are incompetent at games and are dishonest regarding their intentions. Societal norms have framed gaming as a male activity and as such male gamers may be enforcing these gendered identity codes as a way to create boundaries to protect their "ownership" of gaming spaces. As a response to these gendered identity codes, the women gamers of this study performed various acts in order to maintain their gamer and gender identities.

While time was relevant within the interviews, with a majority of the women describing their gamer identity as tied to their time investment, the women did not express the sense of gendered expectations being placed on them in regards to time. When considering participation in gaming specifically, time is something women have greater control over due to time being difficult for other gamers to regulate, alternatively, identity codes that are based around traits that are difficult to change or conceal, such as a players' voices, are easier for other gamers to police. Even so, when considering professionals or others with external time constraints, gender may arise as an issue for differing reasons. Therefore, further research into the gamer identities of working professionals may lead to new insights into how time commitment is enforced or gendered within the gaming community. For instance, it is known that women often take on the "second shift" (Hochschild 2003), so that men may be "allowed" free time after work, while women are expected to maintain household and familial responsibilities, which may cut into their own free time that they may have spent otherwise gaming.

Knowledge, however, was found to be gendered in regards to the expectations held of women gamers. They reported that gaming community members held them at one of two extremes: expectations to perform better than average or expectations of worse than average performance. Some of the participants actively combated the stereotype by going out of their way to perform well for fellow players to uphold their gamer identity. Others focused on maintaining their knowledge of the game, such as reading game updates, to be prepared for any questioning regarding their membership. These findings contrast with the findings of Beavis and Charles (2007), whose female *Counter Strike* players avoided combating the negative stereotypes. The *Counter Strike* players were concerned that their playing well would damage their gender identity, and were concerned that others would view their desire to play as unfeminine. Future studies could advance analysis of demographic factors to understand when and why women proactively combat gendered stereotypes, specifically those related to masculinity. For instance, factors like time gaming and game genre may influence the identity work processes women draw from in negotiating their gamer identities.

While most of the women focused on challenging the expectations held of their gamer identities, others adopted the negative stereotypes for their own gain. Schwalbe et al (2000) termed these behaviors as "trading power for patronage," a process of subordinate adaptation in that the subordinate accepts their negative status, in this case the stereotype of "girl gamer," as a way to seek benefits from their relationship with the dominant group. Though the women may be gaining the benefits of this behavior, it allows for the reinforcement of the stereotype that women gamers are only gaming to gain male attention. Interestingly, while few women did this, those that adopted the stereotypes either claimed to move past it or were appropriating them to promote their personal game streaming channel. This behavior indicates that they are not

adopting the stereotypes to gain acceptance when actively gaming but instead for the purposes of upholding their gamer identity broadly within the community. Expanding the current study brings the opportunity to interview women who adopt and potentially appropriate the stereotypes, allowing for broader understanding of why and how the women are adopting the traits. This may give insights into a potential sub-culture of women gamers who appropriate the "girl gamer" stereotypes for their own benefits.

The "girl gamer" stereotype also came into play when the participants discussed other women within the community. Due to the saliency of gender within the gaming community, it is not surprising that othering occurs. Othering, as defined by Schwalbe et al (2000), is a process performed by subordinates against other members of the subordinate group as a strategy or reaction to oppressive identity codes imposed upon them by the dominant group. Similar to the findings of Taylor et al (2009), a few of the women gamers performed defensive othering by maintaining the belief that certain other women gamers are only in the community for non-gaming related activities, such as for male attention. Interestingly, the women who adopted the stereotypes also othered women gamers, with some specifically targeting women who were there for male attention. The women of the study did uphold that they were adopting the stereotypes for their own empowerment while the "other" women were there for inappropriate reasons; however, it remained that participants did not make blanket statements that all other women were there for attention-seeking or other inappropriate reasons. Whether the women were adopting the stereotypes or combating them, using othering as a means of avoiding being labeled as a "girl gamer" allows for the reinforcement of the belief system that views women as others within gaming.

Due to the vast diversity of video games, future research could delve into the difference between gamers across different video game communities. As each game varies in gameplay and content it is possible that the expectations held for gamers, and potentially women gamers, may differ depending on the game played. For example, Tara, the former raid leader in World of Warcraft (WoW) expressed stricter team regulations and schedules when compared with the descriptions of other participants' teams. As based in her experiences, her views on what a real WoW player should know may be conflated to match her own knowledge. The extent of her knowledge may exemplify fulfilling an extreme in order to additionally address "girl gamer" obstacles of either being placed above or below expectation, or a combination of these two experiences. Further research into gaming genres may reveal distinct impacts of game specific rules or norms on the way women gamers navigate gendered stereotypes.

As it is clear that the participants of this study had gendered gaming experiences, additional research exploring men and their gender and gamer identities is needed. As gaming has been traditionally viewed as a male activity, male gamers are potentially reacting to an invasion of a space they assume is theirs. The understanding of spaces could also be approached through other research areas that focus on gender and activities, such as sports, as arguments have been made regarding women's physiology as a means to differentiate based on gender. Additionally, this research may give insights into other communities that exist online, such as the hacking community, which has similarities with the gaming community as they are both activities that exist online and are traditionally considered male activities. Research into women hackers and the ways in which they negotiate their hacker and gender identities may provide insights into women's identity negotiations, such as if they are using generic social processes,

when participating in the technological communities, though, due to the sometimes criminal nature of the hacking community, different negotiation strategies may be utilized.

This research expands upon the area of gender and gaming by specifically using an identity work perspective to understand how women gamers are negotiating their gamer identities while holding a marginalized status within the gaming community. Examination of participant interviews revealed that women gamers are using some of the generic social processes, as defined by Schwalbe et al (2000), to navigate negative stereotypes that specifically target and gender the identity codes used by gamers to affirm gamer group membership. This research expands upon previous research by providing insights into specific generic social processes utilized by women gamers as they navigate the gaming community, specifically in regards to the women who appropriated the negative stereotypes and those that are combating stereotypes through gaming performance.

APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER

University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board
Office of Research & Commercialization
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276
www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html

Approval of Exempt Human Research

From: **UCF Institutional Review Board #1**
FWA00000351, IRB00001138

To: **Emily P. Rosenbaum**

Date: **June 13, 2016**

Dear Researcher:

On 06/13/2016, the IRB approved the following activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review:	Exempt Determination
Project Title:	Login: g@mergir1xX Identity Work of Collegiate Women Gamers
Investigator:	Emily P. Rosenbaum
IRB Number:	SBE-16-12329
Funding Agency:	
Grant Title:	
Research ID:	N/A

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the Investigator Manual.

On behalf of Sophia Dziegielewski, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Joanne Muratori on 06/13/2016 02:16:19 PM EDT

IRB Manager

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APPENDIX B: DEMOGRAPHIC INFROMATION FORM

1. Pseudonym (optional):
2. Year in school:
3. Declared major(s)/minor(s):
    a. If you have not declared, what major(s)/minor(s) are you considering?
4. Age:
5. Race/Ethnicity:
6. Compared to American (US) families in general, would you say that your family's income is (please circle one):
    a. Far below average
    b. Below average
    c. Average
    d. Above average
    e. Far above average
    f. Don't know
7. What age were you when you first started playing video games?
8. How many hours per week do you play video games?

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. Since you answered this call, that means you identify yourself as a gamer. Can you tell me about how you first started playing video games?
    a. (If they mention another individual introducing them to the community) So (the person) introduced you to video games. What did they teach you, if anything, about video games and the gaming community?
    b. What were the first video games you played?
        i. What about these games made you interested in continuing your video game playing?
    c. How did these experiences lead to you identifying yourself as a "gamer" over time?
2. It sounds as if you define gamer as (their words). Could you tell me more about how you define a "gamer"?
3. It sounds as though gaming is an independent activity (based on their answer). It sounds as though when you described (their words) that you almost would define that as a community. Am I understanding that correctly? Could you tell me more about the gaming community?
    a. You mentioned (some traits) could you tell me more about some of the expectations for what it means to be a gamer within the community?
    b. Are there stereotypes others may have of gamers?
        i. (If theses stereotype manly focus on men) It sounds as if these stereotypes apply to male gamers. Are there stereotypes others may have towards women gamers?

    c. Do you feel the community has different expectations for its members based on gender?
        i. How so? What are these differing expectations?

4. Do you define yourself as part of this gaming community?
    a. If yes, or no, why?
    b. Are there things that you accepted about this community?
    c. Are there things you disapproved of?
5. What expectations do you have of fellow gamers?
6. As a gamer, what expectations do you have of yourself in regarsds to video game playing?
    a. Out of other gamers?
7. (If they claim to be a member of the community) As a gamer in the gaming community, are there any rules you feel should be followed?
    a. For yourself?
    b. For other gamers?
8. Has your gender ever been a topic in regards to your video game playing?
    a. (If yes), In what ways?
9. (If yes to prior question) Could you talk to me about a time where you were aware of gender while playing video games?
    a. Do you feel that your gender has been a part of your game playing experience?
    b. Do you feel that your gender is important in regards to your game playing experiences?
10. Do you think that there are more men in the gaming community then women?

a. Do you think that male gamers impose expectations for game play on women gamers?
    i. (If yes), What are these expectations?
b. Are these expectations something you impose upon yourself?
c. Do you feel that these expectations define a true gamer?
    i. If no, what expectations would you consider define a true gamer?
d. Do you think other women feel the same about these male imposed expectations?
    i. If no, how do you think they feel?
e. Do you feel other women gamers follow these expectations?

11. Do you think there are many women gamers within the gaming community?
    a. Why do you think this?
    b. Do you feel that women can be good game players?
    c. In what ways do you feel that women gamers help or hinder the gaming community?
    d. Do you feel that there is competition between women gamers?
        i. Why do you feel that is the case?
12. Do you feel that there are games specifically meant for women?
    a. (If yes) Could you describe these games to me.
    b. What are your thoughts on these games?
    c. Do you think that other women gamers embrace these games?
    d. Do you embrace these games?
    e. Do you feel that these titles help or hinder women gamers in the gaming community?

        i. Why do you feel this way?

13. Have you ever heard of the term “girl gamer”?

    a. What are your first thoughts on hearing this term?

    b. Do you feel it should be used to distinguish women gamers from men gamers?

    c. Do you think other women embrace or reject this term?

        i. Why do you think this?

    d. Do you embrace or reject this term?

        i. Why do you think this?

14. Do you think there is a sub-culture of women game players?

    a. If yes, could you describe this sub-culture to me.

    b. Do you feel you are a part of this sub-culture?

    c. In your opinion, what things about this sub-culture differentiates it from the larger gaming community?

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