Sexism in online video games: The role of conformity to masculine norms and social dominance orientation

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ABSTRACT

Sexism toward women in online video game environments has become a pervasive and divisive issue in the gaming community. In this study, we sought to determine what personality traits, demographic variables, and levels of game play predicted sexist attitudes towards women who play video games. Male and female participants ($N = 301$) who were players of networked video games were invited to participate in an anonymous online survey. Social dominance orientation and conformity to some types of masculine norms (desire for power over women and the need for heterosexual self-presentation) predicted higher scores on the Video Game Sexism Scale (i.e., greater sexist beliefs about women and gaming). Implications for the social gaming environment and female gamers are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Last year, U.S. consumers spent $16.6 billion on video games (Entertainment Software Association, 2012) and the global video game market reached $67 billion. With such widespread usage, the demographics of the average user are gradually changing. Particularly, the growing number of women in traditionally male gaming spaces has changed the social dynamic of many online environments. This shift, however, has not been welcomed by some users, and sexual harassment has become a prevalent issue in the gaming community (O'Leary, 2012).

The pervasiveness of harassment may be tied to the evolution of gaming. Original video game consoles only permitted co-located individuals hardwired to a device to share the same virtual experience. Now, many consoles are equipped with internet connections, and MMOs (massively multiplayer online games) allow millions of users across the globe to play together. Thus, rather than playing with another individual in the same physical space, now games are shared with faceless strangers around the world. The social identity model of deindividuation effects (Lea & Spears, 1991, 1992) suggests that this anonymity has important implications for how communication transpires in these spaces as it facilitates harassment and other forms of negative interaction.

Indeed, research has acknowledged that online games can be a hostile environment for certain players (Gray, 2012a,b; Kuznekoff & Rose, 2013; Taylor, 2006; Yee, 2006). This is particularly the case for those perceived as outsiders. Although some research indicates that women play games at a rate nearly equal to men (Entertainment Software Association, 2012) and in some cases even invest more time in online games than men (Williams, Consalvo, Caplan, & Yee, 2009), other studies have found that for many game types, men outnumber women and spend considerably more time playing (Chou & Tsai, 2007; Cruea & Park, 2012; Homer, Hayward, Frye, & Plass, 2012; Jackson, von Eye, Witt, Zhao, & Fitzgerald, 2011). Particularly in networked video games, women are often the vocal minority in-game and thus become targeted for harassment (Gray, 2012b; Salter & Blodgett, 2012).

Despite considerable attention in the gaming community, limited research has investigated why certain users choose to harass women in online gaming environments. Thus, this study was designed to investigate the prevalence of sexist beliefs about women who play video games and also tested several personality variables associated with video game sexism.

2. Women and online video games

Despite the number of female gamers, video games have traditionally been perceived as a male space, an activity created by men and for men. Indeed, the gaming industry itself is extremely skewed, with female designers, programmers, and producers comprising only a fragment of its workers (Kafai, Heeter, Denner, & Sun, 2006). Thus, it is not surprising that women are

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underrepresented in video game content (Williams, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory, 2009), and when they are portrayed, are depicted in stereotypical ways that appeal to men (e.g., as a weak princess needing rescue or as a highly sexualized dominatrix; Burgess, Stermer, & Burgess, 2007; Downs & Smith, 2010; Ivory, 2006). Studies have also revealed that playing games with sexualized characters leads players to normalize sexual harassment, and men indicate a greater likelihood to harass women after play (Dill, Brown, & Collins, 2008; Yao et al., 2010). Thus, the content of many video games may promote harassment of women. Given that female users also experience diminished self-efficacy (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009) and self-objectification (Fox, Bailenson, & Tricase, 2013; Fox & Ralston, 2013) when exposed to these portrayals, it is no wonder that women may self-select out of such environments (Norris, 2004).

Game content is not the only deterrent for female gamers, however. As Gray (2012a) notes, "Video game culture has privileged the default gamer, the white male, leading to the maintenance of whiteness and masculinity in this virtual setting" (p. 262). Games are expected to be a male activity, and any female presence may seem like an encroachment on male territory. Thus, as Yee (2006) notes, the problem for women playing these games is that "they are constantly reminded of the intended male subject position they are trespassing upon" (p. 93). Thus, women may miss out on the sense of belonging experienced by male gamers and instead experience ostracism and harassment because of their sex.

Due to affordances that enable multiplayer interaction, networked video games can be hostile spaces characterized by trash talking, objectionable language, and offensive comments (Gray, 2012a,b; Wright, Boria, & Breidenbach, 2002). Women and other minorities are often specifically targeted for this harassment, particularly if they do not conform to expected behaviors (Fox & Bailenson, 2009; Fox & Tang, 2013; Gray, 2012a,b; Salter & Blodgett, 2012; Waddell, Fox, Ivory, & Ivory, 2013). In a field experiment, Kuznekoff and Rose (2013) played a networked violent video game with other anonymous players and interacted with them using male or female pre-recorded voices. The female voice received three times the amount of negative comments than the male voice had received. Waddell et al. (2013) found that male and female players who adhered to sex roles while playing a game were more likely to have friend requests granted afterwards than their counterparts who violated these norms. Fox and Tang (2013) had online game players relate the last incident of harassment they had witnessed or experienced; 10% of these incidents reported sexist remarks ranging from traditional sexism (e.g., "get back in the kitchen") to sexual harassment (e.g., "show me your tits.").

Gaming has been described as a "man's world" dominated by masculine discourse (Salter & Blodgett, 2012). By their sex alone, women are considered outsiders and can be perceived as violating normative sex role behavior simply by participating in many networked games (Taylor, 2006). Expectation states theory elaborates how this non-normative behavior often results in social consequences.

3. Theoretical explanations

3.1. Expectation states theory

According to expectation states theory, diffuse status characteristics such as sex help people anticipate how others will behave in a social interaction (Berger, Fisek, Norman, & Zelditch, 1977). Cultural norms have shaped how the sexes "should" and "should not" behave in social interactions, and people look for cues about sex to proscribe cultural norms to interactants and judge them accordingly. Because of sociocultural stereotypes, men are generally seen as more competent and of higher status than women, leading to expectations of dominance and leadership. Women are considered lower status and thus are expected to behave in a submissive manner. When women violate this expectation and behave assertively, others question the legitimacy of this behavior because of women's low status (Ridgeway, 2001; Ridgeway & Bourg, 2004). Thus, women are often penalized for being assertive or expressing dominance.

Expectation states theory is an appropriate framework for examining the perception of women in online games. Because games are popularly perceived and reiterated as a male space, male gamers are afforded higher status and higher perceived competence than female gamers. Although women are often able to remain hidden or anonymous in some gaming environments, it is likely that when women reveal their sex, their legitimacy and competence will be questioned. Additionally, if a female player oversteps her boundaries and asserts herself, the theory predicts that the player will be socially punished for violating expectations. Indeed, Salter and Blodgett (2012) noted that "Women within the hardcore gaming public are given tightly bound roles to play and punished for stepping outside of them" (p. 411).

3.1.1. Masculine norms

In addition to the submissive role expected by women, expectation states theory also suggests that men are expected to enact certain behaviors. *Masculinity* refers to normative beliefs of how men are expected to behave, feel, and think (Mahalik et al., 2003; Thompson, Pleck, & Ferrera, 1992). Masculinity norms are communicated through feedback by the approval or disapproval of behaviors by others and by observing male role models' social behaviors. These masculine norms reflect men's traditionally dominant role in society, associating masculinity with being competitive and strong, controlling one's emotions, and maintaining self-reliance (Mahalik et al., 2003). Although most men acknowledge the existence of these norms, differences arise in the extent to which men conform to them (Mahalik et al., 2003). The extent of conforming to masculine norms can affect how men interact with women. For example, men who described themselves high in masculinity were more likely to sexually harass women (Pryor, 1987). Adherence to traditional masculinity has been found to be associated with favorable attitudes towards sexual harassment and unfavorable attitudes towards gender equality (Sinn, 1997) as well as sexually aggressive behavior (Locke & Mahalik, 2005). Moreover, these norms are intensified in environments where the majority of social interactions occur with other men (Mahalik et al., 2003).

Online video games constitute one of those male-dominated environments, and these environments are reinforced as being a masculine space from an early age. Jansz (2005) proposed that adolescent and young adult males often use game spaces to explore their masculinity and identity. Furthermore, the abundance of male video game characters facilitate the enactment of identities that may be difficult to achieve in real life, allowing the male adolescents to explore identities representing the masculine ideal (Jansz, 2005). Additionally, interactions with other male players in networked video games provide opportunities to bond with other males (Frostling-Henningsson, 2009; Trepte, Reinecke, & Juechems, 2012). These bonding experiences may reinforce masculine norms in the video game setting, and in the promotion of the ingroup (males) may continue to demean or isolate the outgroup (females).

Given gaming environments promote masculine norms and that conformity to masculine norms is associated with sexist attitudes, we expect that:

H1: Participants with higher levels of masculinity will report higher video game sexism.