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Gender: How is the Concept and its Challenges Experienced by Male and Female Gamers in World of Warcraft

An explorative qualitative study that focuses on the personal experiences of gamers surrounding the topics of masculinity and femininity in online gaming communities.

Exemplified with male and female World of Warcraft gamers between the ages of 18 – 34.

Master's Thesis in Sustainable Development and Globalization

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Abstract

This paper will further explore the concept and challenges of gender among men and women in online gaming communities; through primarily focusing on the massive multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) World of Warcraft and looking into supporting literature surrounding the topic of gender in current day society. The research data has been gathered from men and women between the ages of 18 and 34 and the sample size exists of 20 willing individuals that have been interviewed to draw most of the qualitative conclusions. Gender studies and surrounding theories started being researched in the late 1960's, as of 2023, gender studies within social geography and sociology are still a widely researched topic and this thesis dives further into the online constructs of gender by looking into digital communication, gender stereotypes, and cultural imperialism. The theory of cultural imperialism within globalization investigates how a dominant culture, often Western cultures, can spread ideologies, values, and norms to other societies, potentially leading to cultural homogenization or the marginalization of local cultures. For this study, this theory of cultural imperialism will be used to further analyze the concept of gender and how it is experienced in digital communication platforms such as online gaming communities.

Gender studies and literature often focuses on physical societies of different populations in different countries, however, there may still be gaps within the literature that looks at how these theories get translated to digital communities and online spaces. The findings of this paper aim to contribute to the ongoing gender literature that is available within online digital communities. Due to the pandemic and lockdown in many countries back between 2019 - 2021, the physical social interaction between people was forced to be decreased and as social creatures many of us ended up seeking this interaction online in various ways. Many different online platforms and communities are continuously being researched when it comes to the concept of gender and gender equality, and it may be interesting to also further research the online gaming platforms and communities and see how the concept of gender and gender equality is represented and experienced there. Some may find the discussion intriguing and may provide insights into digital communication, gender equality, gender stereotypes, and online harassment.

Keywords: Gender stereotypes, gender studies, online harassment, digital communication, online communities, World of Warcraft.

Preface

This document is a representation of the research that was conducted on the experiences and challenges surrounding gender in online gaming communities such as World of Warcraft between 2022 – 2023 right after the ending of the COVID-19 pandemic. This research was conducted for a master's thesis for the study Sustainable Development and Globalization at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, and the intention of this thesis is to explore the topic of gender further and contribute with fresh relevant insights to the existing literature surrounding the topic of gender. In collaboration with a supervisor, Ståle Angen Rye, the topic was finalized in June 2023.

The research on the experiences and challenges of the concept of gender in online communities was conducted over a nine-month period from March 2022 until November 2022 and partly in the start of 2023 within the massive multiplayer online role-player game known as World of Warcraft which has a digital environment meaning that the research was conducted digitally. This paper is intended for anyone who is interested in gaining various insights on gender and online communities. The research conducted for this thesis had a qualitative research angle and aims to portray in-depth personal experiences on gender from gamers within the World of Warcraft and gaming community.

I am grateful to various individuals who have assisted in the writing of this thesis and conducting the research. I want to thank all the individuals that partook in this research and were willing to provide their insights on the topic of gender identity and their personal experiences. I want to thank my supervisor Ståle Angen Rye for his time, guidance, feedback, and support. I want to thank Hedda Tomine Berg, Erlend Berg, and Talal Mohammad for their feedback and critical view.

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1. Introduction

Gaming is a popular phenomenon that was made possible through the globalization process of increasing interconnectedness worldwide and gaming refers to the activity of interacting with electronic devices to have an experience surrounding various categories and genres such as action, adventure, strategy, role-playing, sports, and plenty more different type of games. Without globalization, game developers would not have access to international markets, we would not be able to play games that are made in a different country, without globalization, the internet as we know it today would not be there for us to be able to play games online. Thus, without the process of globalization and the increase in popularity within online gaming this thesis would not be as relevant as it is today compared to years ago. There is an increase in the participation of online gaming all over the world, which naturally will result in the creation of new communities as a community is a social group/network of individuals that share values, and goals (Demont-Heinrich, 2011). In 2019, the Covid-19 pandemic struck, and it urged for social distancing, staying at home, and a further digitalization of life as we know it. As we were uncertain for how long the pandemic would affect us for, more and more people started to explore online platforms to express themselves, to connect, and to pass time and many other reasons.

Engaging within the constructs of gaming is a popular way for individuals from all age generations to spend their time and money on, including families, young adults, and regular adults as well. There are different terminologies used for various gamers, from hardcore gamers to casual gamers, to esports enthusiasts. The inclusive nature of gaming has contributed to its widespread popularity and the growth of the gaming industry within all ages. But how inclusive is this environment? How do we manage and apply societal constructs in such a rapidly growing industry? Is gender represented the same in games as it is western society? Do we just assume that gaming communities work the same as physical communities? Is gender equality present in gaming communities? How is online harassment experienced and how do we control this?

For the master's in Sustainable Development and Globalization students are required to write about related concepts and topics within the program's contents. The thesis topic is related to globalization, digital communication, cultural imperialism, and the 5th sustainable development goal of gender equality. The research wishes to explore the experiences and challenges surrounding the topic of gender by interviewing women and men between the ages of 18 and 34 within online gaming communities in widely known multiplayer games. To

narrow down the scope of this research, the paper specifically focuses on one massive multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), World of Warcraft, as it is still the most popular MMORPG of all time as of 2022 with a total of 117 million subscribers (MMO Populations, 2022). This study utilized a qualitative research method approach by primarily conducting semi-structured interviews with the study population in the digital environment of World of Warcraft in European servers.

A bulk of the prior research that has been conducted on similar topics surrounding gender in online gaming was conducted prior to 2015 with more research coming to light in the current days, hence the reason for conducting this research in 2022 – 2023 as online gaming has become a popular outlet for people to spend their time on, even before COVID-19 online gaming was extremely popular, and we see ourselves and younger generations resort to online gaming as an expressive and creative outlet. The paper aims to further dive into relevant supporting topics such as how gender equality is represented and what gender stereotypes are in these communities. It will focus lightly on the portrayal of men and women in games, and lightly touch upon the non-player characters (NPC's), to see if this may have an impact on how people experience gender.

Due to the time constraints that come with the writing of this thesis and conducting the research, the paper will only focus on two gender identities: femininity and masculinity. The research of other genders would be extremely intriguing and rewarding as well and would be a potential topic for future research papers. This paper aims to highlight previous research conducted on gender and desirably add new insights into the online gaming community. The paper will use academic articles, web journals, news articles, interviews with the community, and will also use personal experiences to support the findings of the paper.

1.1. Background

1.1.1 Globalization and Digital Communication

We are all familiar with globalization and many academic and non-academic articles could explain the process in a different manner. The driving factor behind globalization is a debate that many authors remain occupied with different theories as to how globalization affects us and the societies that we live in (Cuadra-Montiel, 2012). Globalization and globalization theories have been analyzed from different point of views to try and explain the phenomenon; economics, mathematics, international relations, politics, social sciences and no one seems to agree (Bird & Stevens, 2003). Some of the shaped theories with various views around how

globalization has and is developing are, modernization theory, dependency theory, world systems theory, hyper globalization theory, network theory, transnationalism, cultural imperialism vs globalization of culture, constructivism and a few more. Each has its own arguments what is driving globalization forward, for this research we will investigate the theories of cultural imperialism and globalization of culture along with the subject of digital communication to explain the findings of this research.

Globalization, at its core, is a multidimensional intricate and complicated phenomenon that affects and changes economic, cultural, ideological, political, and various other dimensions and is seen as a globally transforming process (Palanisamy, 2012). Globalization is often labeled as having increased interconnectedness and interdependence between countries and their economies, cultures, and societies and the impact of globalization can be experienced on a regional, national, and international level (Cuadra-Montiel, 2012). The processes of globalization have brought with a lot of controversial reactions especially when it comes to the preservation of culture and diversity (Cuadra-Montiel, 2012).

But what does digital communication mean and how is this relevant to globalization and this topic? Digital communication can be described as the transmission and reception of digital signals such as speech, images, text, etc. (Palanisamy, 2012). After digitization data, a digital communication link can transmit data from one geographical location to the other which, in simple forms, is how a lot of current day communication works (Palanisamy, 2012). One of the first notable developments within digital communication would be the telegraphic system that was introduced in 1844 and we can consider this as an example of long-distance digital communication. It would send digital signals in the form of code to another telegraph across the Atlantic and this invention allowed for rapid progress in analog communication systems (Palanisamy, 2012). Now skipping ahead to 2023, we are in the information era where information is widely and easily accessible and technological developments with digital communication are constant (Palanisamy, 2012). We see that the social norms are changing, allowing for more systems to become digital and rely more and more on digital communication in daily life (Adams, 2018). The internet is the cornerstone of digital communication, providing a vast network that connects people across the globe. It enables instant communication in the matter of seconds through email, messaging apps, and social media platforms. Digital communication with the assistance of these digital tools has eliminated geographical boundaries, allowing individuals to connect with others from different cultures and backgrounds and the only thing that is holding them back now is different time zones. People can now collaborate, share ideas, and engage in discussions on a global scale, allowing for

cross-cultural understanding, cooperation, but also for an increase in conflict. It is easier to work remotely due to digital communication, easier to study remotely with digital communication, and to communicate with your friends across the globe. Digital communication can be as simple as sending an email or text to your professor or friend but can also go to the extends of gathering new stakeholders to kick off your new non-profit organization (Palanisamy, 2012). Digital communication has transformed business practices by enabling companies to operate on a global scale. E-commerce platforms have facilitated cross-border trade, allowing businesses to reach customers worldwide, and game developers to release their game wherever in the world they want. Companies can engage in real-time communication with suppliers, partners, and customers, streamlining supply chains and expanding market opportunities. Many companies, start-ups, entrepreneurs, and organizations have created a dependency on income through digital communication channels allowing for the technical development of digital communication to be continuous which would favor the perspective theory of hyper globalization which argues that globalization is primarily driven by market forces and increasing economic growth by trade and investment (Palanisamy, 2012).

Globalization and digital communication are intricately intertwined, and it can be argued that they could be considered co-dependent entities in our current day and age, with digital communication playing a significant role in facilitating and accelerating the processes of globalization. The internet, social media, various messaging apps, and just the creation and now existence of our phones with its technology and accessible market price make it extremely easy to transmit information and thus also allowing society to be highly interconnected and be dependent on digital communication. Digital communication now plays a crucial role in shaping global activism and political movements. Social media platforms have become powerful tools for organizing protests, raising awareness about social and political issues, and mobilizing support. They have facilitated the rapid spread of information and facilitated global conversations on important topics on a global scale. But this is only for those that have access to digital communication tools, which also poses the challenge with equality. For those that have access, propaganda and fake news is hard to filter, allowing for also a big divide among different opinions and political actors.

The globalization theories we will be looking into to assist in the analysis of this research is cultural imperialism and globalization of culture and see how this is applied into the world of gaming. Cultural imperialism is more focused on the wide range of problems that comes with cultural globalization, referring to powerful West global cultures (especially the United States) dominating other local, national, and regional cultures around the globe

(Demont-Heinrich, 2011). It refers to this powerful Western culture becoming the standard in many other cultures as well, especially those that have entered the globalized world at a later stage, often resulting in the homogenization or loss of unique cultural identities from other cultures. With cultural imperialism, the domination of Western culture is seen as an outcome from historical inequalities with political and economic power having historically been in the West and is now still dominating today's market (Demont-Heinrich, 2011). Cultural imperialism is concerned with cultural flows of inequalities among both developed and developing countries and may help us analyze how this would be translated to digital communication. As this theory, in the topic of gender in online gaming communities, could assist in examining how dominant cultural norms and practices related to gender influence and shape these communities. It can shed light on how certain gendered stereotypes, biases, and power dynamics are reinforced or challenged within the digital gaming space. The ideal is to utilize the conceptual framework of cultural imperialism to analyze if the gaming communities enable gender norms and gender inequalities like the ones we are experiencing in western society. Additionally, the theory could assist to identify the extent to which globalized gaming industries influence the game's content, narratives, and portrayals of gender as most games are developed in Western countries. It can illuminate how these representations may reinforce or challenge existing gender inequalities and power structures that are also present in our physical constructs of society.

1.1.2 Gaming & Online Gaming Communities

Online and offline gaming has evolved significantly over the past 70 years and continues to grow by the decade, with advancements in technology that allow digital graphics to be enhanced, to simplified and more engaging gameplay mechanics for players, and more optimized multiplayer capabilities to engage with your friends online in a digitalized world. Online gaming has been popular since the early days of the internet, with the first online multiplayer game being developed in 1973. However, it was not until the late 1990s and early 2000s that online gaming took off exponentially with the widespread adoption of faster internet connections. One of the major breakthroughs within online gaming that allowed for the exponential growth in the industry was the development of MMORPGs such as RuneScape in 2001, Ultima Online in 1997, and EverQuest in 1999, and in 2004, World of Warcraft that took the gaming industry by storm. These games allow players to create and control their own virtual personas and choose features of their characters how they wished to be seen and expressed in the game. In this world, with their own characters, they can interact with other players in a

shared online world and thus also choose their own identity on how they wish to express themselves. Something that in reality, at that time, would not be as accessible to do for everyone to express their identity the way they may have wanted to due to social constructs. Additionally, the development of MMORPGs offered a level of immersion and social interaction that was not possible with single-player games as you could easily meet people all over Europe or all over the world for that matter, therefore MMORPGs quickly gained a devoted following with the creation of various communities within the games themselves (Gauntlett, 2008).

To date, gaming has now become a popular form of entertainment for all ages and a thriving industry with a market worth of \$159.3 billion in 2020 (Wijman, 2020). As of 2023, there have been nine different gaming console generations with the most notable ones being PlayStation, Nintendo, Xbox, and naturally our phones and laptops being capable of being modern gaming devices as well. As of 2021, there are 1.48 billion gamers in the world, 715 million of these are in Europe making Europe the second biggest continent with gamers (Statista, 2022). For all these games, people tend to want to share ideas, opinions, and excitement about their games with others which allows for a gaming community to be created. A gaming community can be defined as a group of like-minded individuals that come together and discuss various topics surrounding games and this can be both offline and online, like the definition of a regular community in real life (Golbeck, 2018). Often, these communities focus on specific games or topics within the industry, and almost every single game that is out there has its own community surrounding that game making this topic a lot more complex. There are thousands of different online gaming communities where gamers get together and chat about various topics, most often they come in the format of sub-reddits on the popular page Reddit.com or forums on 4chan (Golbeck, 2018). The most popular platforms to use for these communities are Facebook, Reddit, YouTube, Discord, Twitch, Steam, Twitter, and 4chan. We see an increase in competitive gaming communities and esports as well, where skilled players are trained within the constructs of one specific game and compete against each other in organized tournaments and leagues, often with substantial prize pools. It is becoming more mainstream to watch esports tournaments, much like regular sports, globally there are roughly 540 million esports viewers that indulge in the excitement of esports (Statista, 2023). Despite not being quite at the same market value yet as physical sports, it is projected to continue to grow over the next decade rather than to decline in market value. Additionally, as a side effect from the rise of the gaming industry, streaming platforms have also emerged and have gained traction in followers, allowing gamers to share their gameplay experiences with others in real-time and build a following and community and engaging various gamers worldwide.

With the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, all of us worldwide were required to spend more time in isolation which often required us to stay at home and find something to do. Many of us started resorting more to gaming as well for various reasons. Families were looking into system consoles for their kids to stay occupied, others missed social interaction, and some wanted to do something else than scroll online so we started downloading more games to our phones. A tangible example of a study that was conducted on consumer spending on gaming show that in the month of May and June of 2020 videogame sales had increased by 39% globally which is considered a huge increase for sales within the gaming industry (Simon-Kucher & Partners, 2020). The number of hours that consumers spend online had also increased during that period, these same two months showed that there was a 30% increase in gamers spending 5 hours or more per week on games with a large proportion of this being in online games (Simon-Kucher & Partners, 2020). Not only do consumers spend more money and time on the actual gaming activity, but they also watch more live streaming content on for example Twitch or YouTube, a 42% increase in viewers on these streaming platforms was measured during those same two months- (Simon-Kucher & Partners, 2020). As of 2022, the streaming platform Twitch has over 140 million unique visitors each month and 7.4 million “streamers” post content on the platform highlighting the popularity of the platform (Dean, 2023).

1.1.3 Gaming Criticism and Debates

Since the early 2000’s, gaming has been subjected to many controversies and criticism and many of them are about the social effects of video games on the people that play them (Freedman, 2002). These gaming debates generally refer to issues, challenges, and incidents within the gaming industry or gaming community that have generated significant attention, criticism, and societal interest. These controversies and debates can arise from various aspects of gaming, including game content, industry practices, player behavior, and even negative impacts on society from gaming. To list some controversies and popular debates surrounding gaming (Needleman, 2017):

“Violence and graphic content in games makes players aggressive” A popular controversy is that videogames cause children and young adults to become more violent in real life due to the explicit, violent, and gore content that is available in games. However, this controversy has not been scientifically proven.

“Loot boxes and microtransactions in games enables young adults to develop gambling addictions” Microtransactions in games refers to the possibility to use real-life money to purchase in-game content in the form of random generated items from the purchases.

There is no age limit set to most microtransactions meaning that any player of whatever age could purchase an item. Often, these in-game purchases can power up the player in numerous advantageous ways. In some countries, such as Belgium and the Netherlands, there were laws made against loot boxes that did not allow gaming companies to monetize off their customers in those countries through that method.

“There is a lack of representation and diversity within the gaming industry and its male dominated industry” This has been a popular topic of debate due to the industry being heavily dominated by male game developers and gaming has been perceived to be made for the “male gaze”. In 2021, 61% of all game developers globally are men, and in 2009 for example only 11% of game developers globally were women (Statista, 2022). The criticism that is given towards diversity within games argue that games often perpetuate gender stereotypes, lack representation of marginalized groups such as the LGBTQ+ communities, and that many games limit options for character customization allowing you to only to make slim and fit male/female characters (Golbeck, 2018).

“Gaming further enables online harassment and toxic behavior to others and especially to women” The gaming community for years has faced issues of online harassment, toxicity, and sexism. We can think of the gamergate harassment campaign that happened in 2014, the #metoo campaign also reached online gaming communities, and many other forms of harassment has been reported from these online platforms (Golbeck, 2018). For instance, cyberbullying, hate speech, and exclusionary behavior within gaming communities are recurring topics that do not have a limit of where this harassment can end due to not having restrictions on the communication channels games have.

“Gaming leads to addiction and excessive gaming in young adults damaging their development and social skills” One can consume many hours within games, from a few minutes to several hours a day. Without parental control and limits to gaming, gaming could become an addiction like substance abuse addictions some argue. Critics say that excessive gaming can lead to social isolation, neglect of responsibilities, mental health issues such as depression and loneliness, and various other adverse health effects towards physical health as well. During the COVID-19 pandemic teens aged between the age of 15 – 19 saw an increase of spending time on games from 73 minutes a day in 2019 to 112 minutes a day in 2020 (Statista, 2022).

“Game developers are exposed to extreme labor conditions and have “crunch” culture ingrained into their work environment” More and more do we see game developers quit due to unhealthy work environments, for example with Activision Blizzard, where sexual

harassment cases keep coming to light on social media. Unhealthy work environment also refers to extreme labor conditions with long working hours where some developers are just expected to work 80 – 100-hour work weeks. This is also referred to as “crunch” culture, which is not illegal yet and developers are expected to invest that time to finish the game’s deadline. Which often results into half finished, glitched, and not fully operational games and burnt-out staff.

“The representation of topics portrayed within the games do not often reflect actual reality but are portrayed as such. Thus, allowing various generations to gain misinformation from games” The portrayal of mental health, race, sexuality, and even history and important historical events are not portrayed as accurate within a lot of games. The construct of a videogame is in the hands of a developer, there is few to no rules how a gaming developer shapes a game. Much like writing a book, however books often get banned in various countries but games not as much. There are few countries that do ban certain videogames when it is too violent or too explicit, but many are still widely available. Many various game narratives have received criticism and discussions often revolve around questions of accuracy of the game narrative, viewer discretion, sensitivity to the public, and potentially opening platforms/communities to hate speech (Golbeck, 2018).

Despite gaming often being at the center of certain controversies or problems within society, it is a field that can be researched more and is gaining more traction among feminist studies. The gaming industry and communities are now being researched more, but this was not until late 2010’s that more and more research became available on these and similar topics within the gaming industry (Malkowski & Russworm, 2017). One notable controversy that will be used throughout this thesis surrounding the gaming community on an international scale was the Gamergate controversy that happened back in 2014. This movement was seen as a culture war between two parties; one side were mostly game makers (primarily women) that wanted more social inclusion in the gaming community and the other side were misogynists, anti-feminists, and individuals that were against the social inclusion of women within gaming (Golbeck, 2018). This movement highlighted the damages gaming communities can have on individuals speaking out for gender equality.

1.1.4 World of Warcraft

World of Warcraft (WoW) is a massive multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) for PC developed and published by Blizzard Entertainment, now also known as Activision Blizzard, and was released back in 2004. and despite being released over 17 years ago, to date,

it is still the most popular MMORPG as of 2022 (Messner, 2022). World of Warcraft is one of the most popular and influential MMORPGs to have hit the gaming market and it is known for its large virtual world reaching to various lands within the world, expansive and detailed lore, and the game offers an immersive gameplay experience where you take on the persona of your own created character. Prior to the release of World of Warcraft in 2004, there were 3 other core games that are seen as World of Warcraft's predecessors that all led up to World of Warcraft as we know it today; Warcraft: Orcs & Humans, Warcraft II: Tides of Darkness, and Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos. The Warcraft franchise, as of 2023, has 22 released books, 13 released expansions for the World of Warcraft MMORPG, 4 different core games, and 1 released movie, all of this is made available for purchase so that players and fans can further diverge themselves in this fictional world and lore.

When downloading World of Warcraft to your PC and subscribing to the monthly 11-euro subscription, your first step is to create your own character. The role-playing element of the game allows you to create your own character, you get to choose your own race, gender, and appearance and so you get to decide what bodily features the character will have, essentially creating another persona. This allows users to take on a different identity if they so wish. Based on a study conducted in 2020, it has been identified that roughly 29% of male gamers worldwide would prefer to play a female character with older men having a higher percentage with this preference (Quantic Foundry, 2021). This character is used to then explore the world of Azeroth to whatever degree they please, the game offers a vast various diverse landscapes, cities, dungeons, and quests that the player needs to level up for to conquer or visit. When players create their own character and customize said character, they can choose from various races and classes, from humans to elves, and from goblins to trolls, each race and class has its unique abilities and playstyles that the player can customize to their desires as well once they start playing.

After picking a race and class, they need to choose a faction, they can choose between becoming part of the "Horde" or become part of the "Alliance". These two factions can loosely be compared to political entities in terms of their conflicts, ideologies, values, history, and motivations. They are opposing factions meaning that you cannot "chat" with the opposing faction, what you can do, is fight the opposing faction. The races within these factions have distinct cultural backgrounds, political values, world views, and different motivations why they are part of that specific faction. The races within the Alliance exist out of; Humans, Night Elves, Draeneis, Worgens, Dwarves, and Gnomes. The races within the Horde exist out of; Taurens, Trolls, Blood Elves, Orcs, Goblins, and the Undead. The Horde and Alliance are

engaged in an ongoing ancient conflict derived from the books, driven by opposing ideologies, territorial disputes, and past grievances. The Horde and Alliance engage in battles and wars with each other, striving to protect their territories, secure resources, and assert their dominance much like we see in our own human history. While the Horde and Alliance can be seen as representing different political factions, their conflict is rooted in factional identity and allegiance rather than conventional politics within our own society. The motivations for their conflicts are often centered around honor, survival, vengeance, and the pursuit of power. Players historically create a sense of loyalty and attachment to their factions, which is an interesting effect from the game's infrastructure that allows opposite factions to also have different communities. In 2023, the game developers made the biggest factional update to the game since its release nearly 20 years ago, and that was by allowing factions to do content cross-faction. This has never been available prior to the latest expansion of Dragonflight.

The game peaked with over 12 million active monthly subscribers right after the release of one of its expansion contents packs back in 2010 and its numbers have dwindled ever since, however is still considered the most popular MMORPG to date with a new expansion having released in November 2022. The game has been developing over the years and new content is being released on a regular basis with a new expansion rolling out roughly every 2/3 years. New content introduces new quests, new lands to explore, new items to find, new dungeons to conquer, new lore to explore, and to level to an even higher level than before. In 2023, there are 10 expansions for the game, however players now also get to play in the original state of the game back when it released in 2004 if they so wish in the "Classic" original version. The game focuses extensively on social interaction with others, you are encouraged to take on harder missions within the game to try and defeat enemies throughout the world where you may need the help of some friends or strangers. Many people create "guilds" together which is a group of players that have befriended each other and would want to play together more often and chat with each other in the same social channel within the game. The game also includes a player-driven economy, where players can trade and craft items, acquire mounts, and customize their characters' appearance through different gear and items found within the game.

With every update that is released every few weeks, the game continues to evolve further. It is its own gigantic immersive world that players can enter that takes them away from our own societal constructs. This can be seen as a liberal opportunity to escape but can also be perceived as a double-edged sword where it can allow for a disconnect with our actual world. The game has often been subjected to being addictive and can often become the center of video gaming addictions among players and researchers as it allows people to get "stuck" in this

online and virtual world which often has been expressed by gamers as a “new alternative reality” (Venn, 2017). In the game, there are various types of players; casual players, hardcore players, role-players, PVP’ers, PVP’ers, and streamers that partake in various different types of players. The player base is diverse, and back in 2015, roughly 35% of the World of Warcraft player base accounted of female gamers (Mueller, 2015). Thus, showing that more men than women do play the game. Unfortunately, there is no data available for the gender diversification of Warcraft players as of 2023 and potentially this gap has decreased.

1.1.5 Sustainable Development Goal 5 and Harassment

On the 25th of September 2015, the United Nations (UN) set out a utopian plan to try and address the world’s most pressing concerns related to economic, social, and environmental challenges. This ambitious plan was set out to be achieved by 2030 and is also better known as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and requires all nations around the globe to be involved. In total, 17 SDGS were made in 2015 with 169 individual targets to try and achieve and implement the goals, 42 of these targets focus on means of implementation and the 17th goal is devoted only to implementation (Stafford-Smith et al, 2015). Each SDG aims to address a larger issue at hand, and for this thesis we will investigate SDG 5; “Gender Equality: achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” (United Nations, 2022). The 5th SDG has a total of 9 sub targets to attempt to achieve the main goal, and according to the United Nations (2022) it would take another 40 years at our current pace before women and men are represented equally in national political leadership and we are very far off track to achieve this goal by 2030. Achieving gender equality after the COVID-19 pandemic has set us back even further. In 2021 a rapid gender assessment was conducted in 13 countries undertaken by the United Nations for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women which found that 45% of women experienced some form of sexual violence since COVID-19 (United Nations, 2022). This is an alarmingly high number, especially knowing that COVID-19 urged for the increase in social distancing which raises the question where this sexual violence occurred. It is hard to document where these forms of violence occur, as often sexual violence survivors would not always want to come forward. Many cases are forms of domestic abuse; however, how would sexual violence be translated in digital communication? How does this SDG go into gender equality within the digital constructs of society?

Online harassment is becoming an increasing issue where social media platforms no longer are just for fun and sharing happy thoughts with each other. Social media and digital communication enable online forms of harassment which can be just as harming as harassment

in physical spaces. A study conducted in the US in 2017 showed that 41% of the participants had been subjected to online harassment and 66% had witnessed it (Golbeck, 2018). An issue with online harassment is that it is hard to monitor, privacy issues portray challenges, and it is hard to track down cyberbullies as well. Online harassment, especially towards women, is now a social problem that has manifested itself online, and often even goes to extends from online to offline harassment as well (Golbeck, 2018).

Within gaming communities, online harassment is a recurring topic for all genders. There is no avoiding it, despite gaming developers aiming to create a more inclusive environment for its players, there is no real limit on who plays the games and how they express hateful comments. Online harassment is often towards women and minority groups, a tangible example we can think of in recent time is the Gamergate case where threats got to the point where the FBI was involved (Golbeck, 2018). Furthermore, online harassment is closely linked to SDG 5 as it reinforces harmful gender stereotypes and norms and often women get targeted with sexist, misogynistic, and sexually explicit content, aiming to shame, intimidate, and silence them. Not only can this issue of online harassment be linked to SDG 5, but also to it can hinder access to education (SDG 4) by creating hostile online learning environments for youth. It impacts mental health (SDG 3) and well-being, causing emotional distress and anxiety for the one being projected to the harassment (Golbeck, 2018). Yet the 17 SDGs now do not focus much on the digital communication constructs of our world issues, which raises concerns as well.

To attempt to address online harassment developers are finding ways to increase community moderation, where certain words are banned that can be considered cyberbullying or harassment, and players get banned for unethical behavior that can be determined by the community moderators. Some internal changes game studios are focusing on more now as well is to train and educate their employees on inclusivity and sensitivity. It is hard to gain control over gaming communities, despite the increased engagement with the communities, there is no real limit as to who gets to join the communities. It is a diverse group of players with various viewpoints, cultures, engagements, values, and opinions, and that naturally does not come without challenges for its community members where harassment, social exclusion, and cyberbullying are continuing to be present in most gaming communities and opens the conversation to the presence of gender equality in online communities (Golbeck, 2018).

1.1.6 Diversification of gamers

Throughout the years, gaming was seen as something that was just for “adolescent boys”, however a study conducted back in 2014 showed that roughly 52% of the gaming audience worldwide were female with most female gamers situated in Asian countries (Jayanth, 2014). This 52% does account for mobile phone games as well, which are more popular among women than among men. The phone games tend to be somewhat less socially interactive as they generally do not have voice communications options available which you do have on PC and console. PC gaming is the most popular platform for gamers to be on and in the US in 2019 roughly 54% was male and 46% was female (Clement, 2021). This shows that, in theory, women are only slightly in the minority. However, to this day, often women are perceived to be a larger minority group among the online gaming communities.

Gender inclusivity among the gaming industry is an ongoing issue and many game developers are addressing gender inclusivity in more recently released games which is promising for the development of the industry. Game developers are doing this through various ways, for example by focusing on character customization in games, allowing players to customize their characters in more realistic ways. Another way is by making the main protagonist female, many games have had a male protagonist before identity inclusivity among gaming became a topic for controversies.

1.2. Research Questions and Objectives

The **main question** this research aims to answer is as follows; How is the concept and challenges of gender, specifically masculinity and femininity, experienced by female and male gamers between the ages of 18 – 34 when they are in a digital environment of an MMORPGs such as World of Warcraft?

The **goal** of this research is to identify how female and male gamers experience gender and gender identity along with challenges that they go through in online digital gaming communities. The research aims to provide an explorative qualitative perspective within the topic of gender through having the researcher be in the gaming environment and interviewing gamers in the game. The research wishes to identify various viewpoints on gender, equality, stereotypes, identity, and the challenges players experience surrounding those topics in this digital environment in relation to existing gender literature.

A set of **sub questions** will be answered in this thesis to assist answering the main question of this research. These sub questions are derived from the theoretical framework that can be read in the literature review and the questions read as follows.

- How do men and women view gender and gender stereotypes online?
- How is masculinity and femininity represented in World of Warcraft by the digital environment of the game?
- How is gender equality translated in online gaming communities?
- What are the challenges surrounding the concept of gender in the perspective of the players?

1.3. Relevance of the Research

As we are currently living in a globalized world with limited research having been conducted on online gaming communities, this research could contribute additional viewpoints that may be relevant to communal studies and gender studies. Studying gender in online gaming communities poses to be relevant in 2023 as studies within these constructs could address the ongoing issues of inclusivity, representation, and gender inequality within the gaming industry. The study focuses on femininity and masculinity and aims to dive further into gender stereotypes along with looking into gender equality as well in online gaming communities and seeing how the theory of cultural imperialism applies to online gaming communities.

Understanding the experiences, challenges, and opportunities faced by individuals of different genders in these digital communities is essential for creating more inclusive gaming spaces globally. Values, opinions, viewpoints, and the culture within a gaming community has the potential to influence the person's real-world attitudes as well, making it even more relevant to study how gender representations and interactions within these spaces impact players' perceptions and behaviors when people resort to gaming more frequently.

As mentioned before, without globalization, realistically there would not be such a thing as an online gaming community. One can argue that without globalization we would not be as interconnected as we are now, and that digital communication along with the tool of the internet has opened ways to communicate with each other in a rapid speed where we are unable to keep up with the analysis of various communities as social scientists. As the Covid-19 pandemic placed more focus on that online interconnectedness and togetherness and seemingly increased gender inequality, this research seemed like an appropriate time to be conducted post pandemic in the year of 2023 which is currently characterized as the second-year post pandemic. The conclusions, theories, and the data from this thesis could pose to be valuable for game developers, marketers, and industry stakeholders in attempting to continue to create inclusive and gender sensitive games.

1.4. Structure of the thesis (readers guide)

This document will follow a structure that will describe the research process and research findings in-depth throughout the document.

Chapter 1 contains the background information on the thesis topic, this includes: background information about globalization and digital communication, gaming and gaming communities, World of Warcraft, diversification of gamers, the problem narrative of the research along with the research questions, and the relevance of this research.

Chapter 2 contains the literature review and a theoretical framework. The literature review lists the previous academic research conducted on the topic of gender which is summarized in one of the sub-sections. The literature review highlights the main elements that assisted in shaping the theoretical framework of this research.

Chapter 3 describes the methodology and the research design that were used to conduct this research. This section addresses the following topics: which study populations and what sampling methods were used, what was the exact sample size used, what data collection methods were used, how was the data analyzed, how was reliability and validity of the research and the thesis ensured.

In chapter 4 the data is analyzed per collection method; it describes what data each different research method generated.

Chapter 5 answers the research questions and narrates a discussion based on the data that was listed in section 5.

Chapter 6 concludes the research and will provide an overview of the professional contributions to this study field. It further lists the limitations of this research and possible suggestions for future research.

At the end of this document there will be a list with all the references used and the appendices that are relevant to understand the research to its full extent can be found.

2. Literature Review

2.1. What is the concept of gender?

Gender is a concept created by society and has a different meaning than just someone's physical biological composure, as someone's sex primarily refers to their biological and physiological characteristics (Gauntlett, 2008). Gender refers to the characteristics such as norms, values, behavior, relations, of men, women, boys, and girls, that are socially constructed in current society (World Health Organization, 2022). Gender is often understood as a binary concept, with two distinct categories: male and female. In current day society and through the various literature that is available, it is important to exemplify that gender and identity is not limited to these binary notions any longer. Many cultures and societies acknowledge the existence of non-binary, genderqueer, or gender non-conforming individuals who do not fit within the traditional male/female analogy. This means that gender differs in different parts of the world and different societies and cultures and is also set to change over time, gender and gender identity is not a constant process but more known to be dynamic. We may have predetermined characteristics that describe the different genders per different society that we live in, however this does not mean that every individual will associate themselves with that predetermined gender such as male, female, and non-binary (Gauntlett, 2008).

That is where gender identity comes in, the concept of gender identity came around the 1960's and it is where one's own internal sense of self shapes their own definition of what gender they are, they may feel male, female, or neither even if societally they would belong in one of the predetermined categories (NPR, 2021). This also means that gender identity is something that can be experienced differently per individual and may not correspond with someone's initial designated sex at birth or their assigned gender in society. In current day society, it is a lot more complicated than just having an assigned gender based on your sex. It is therefore important to distinguish between gender identity, gender expression, and biological sex. Gender identity refers to an individual's deeply felt sense of being male, female, or another gender identity. Gender expression relates to the ways in which individuals present themselves externally, such as through clothing, hairstyle, or mannerisms (Gauntlett, 2008). Biological sex refers to the physical attributes and characteristics associated with male or female bodies. One's gender identity and sex can be different, meaning that a biological woman does not per se feel as if she is a "female" in terms of gender identity. There is not a specific number of genders that researchers seem to be able to agree on, however there could be up to 72 genders currently aside of the standard "male" and "female" genders (Medical News Today, 2022).

2.2. Masculinity and femininity

As this research only focuses on the “male” and “female” genders, we will dive further into associated identities within these two genders. Within the male and female genders, we have masculinity and femininity, these are forms of gender identities meaning that they may be associated with different genders and not exclusively to a male or a female person (Mankowski & Smith, 2016). Not only are they gender identities, the concept of femininity and masculinity also refer to social roles, behaviors, and meanings prescribed to men and women in societies (Kimmel, 2001). The ideas of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ have been projected to different meanings with many people having a different connotation to the terms (Gauntlett, 2008). Conceptions of both masculinity and femininity will differ across cultures and we can often see that they are rarely the same across cultures. Characteristically, we can see that often across cultures, masculinity is associated more with power and dominance while femininity is more associated with caring and feeling (Mankowski & Smith, 2016). There are different forms of both masculinities and femininities which can be relevant to describe how individuals identify themselves with the gender identity. Femininity and masculinity are not exclusive to their predetermined gender; you can have a masculine woman and feminine man; this is important to remember. However, the constructs and ideologies from society can allow one to not be able to identify with the gender identity they feel like they truly belong in, which is a more recent issue in current day society.

Masculinity for example, is often seen as the state of “being a man” and men like to have their identities fit within “masculinity” which is a popular topic of debate in our current day society because what really does it mean to be a man and how do we define that (Gauntlett, 2008). Applying the theory of cultural imperialism makes this whole debate very interesting and identically confusing for men in our society. As cultural imperialism implies that dominant cultures, characteristically Western cultures, spread to other cultures and adopt the dominant values and beliefs.

According to Gauntlett (2008), femininity nowadays, is not necessarily seen as the state of ‘being a woman’ as it is with masculinity; instead, it is perceived more as a stereotype of a woman’s role from the past, staying at home and tending to the kids. If we are looking at this through a lens of cultural imperialism and looking at dominant Western beliefs, we see more now that women are not generally bothered about fitting their identity within the constructs of typical ‘femininity’. Femininity is not a core value for women today and not per se a popular way of expressing oneself. Instead, virtually everyone wants to see young women succeed, stand up for themselves, and be independent, to see women empowered (Gauntlett, 2008).

There is a sustainable development goal focused on gender equality and empowering women to achieve and have more access to education (United Nations, 2022). And we do see that women in a global aspect are less equal when it comes to working opportunities and access to education.

Social media in current day society is an important tool to understand and spread current values and stereotypes of gender and in modern Western world we can see an odd mix of equality and inequality between genders. In the physical spaces, women and men may 'feel' equal, but at the same time are aware that this is not entirely accurate, especially online (Gauntlett, 2008). Women have the formal right to do most things that a man can do, and the other way around. In online spaces, gender disparities are quite apparent where these gender roles seem to take on the tendency of old stereotypes of genders. Historically, online gaming communities have been predominantly male-dominated spaces, with female representation often limited and stereotypical. Female characters have been objectified, hypersexualized, or portrayed in traditional gender roles, perpetuating gender stereotypes. So, when gaming environments are set in these kinds of spaces with gender stereotypes and hyper sexualization, only naturally would the player be influenced by what he is surrounded with. A digital environment with a specific set of values can influence players' attitudes and beliefs about women, reinforcing objectification and contributing to the devaluation of women in both virtual and real-world contexts, if this then is a common thing in many games, we could also lightly refer to it as cultural imperialism. Where a dominant gaming culture influences the thoughts and values of its players, if all games represent women in skimpy armor as damsels in distress that need saving it is only natural that players would somewhat believe this stereotype (Gamson et al, 1992). As the repetitive exposure to these portrayals can lead to the internalization of gender biases and expectations, affecting players' perceptions of not only women but of men as well and it can influence players' behavior towards different genders in gaming communities and beyond. It can create an environment that is unwelcoming, hostile, and exclusionary for women and gender-diverse individuals.

This adaption of beliefs and images is not only within gaming, but any digital media platform and through digital communication can we argue that media messages can act like teachers of values, ideologies, and beliefs, even if this was not intended so say by a gaming developer it still happens (Gamson et al, 1992). This means that we need to be cautious what values and viewpoints we expose people and our youngsters to, especially in digital spaces where we have limited control of how values get transferred. We rely on societal expectations about both femininity and masculinity to interpret interactions with others, and form

expectations about ourselves, we are impacted by our surroundings, may that be digital or physical both shape our way of thinking, especially in youth (Dietz, 1998).

2.3. Gender Stereotypes

Gender roles and expectations vary across cultures and are learned through socialization processes. Society assigns certain behaviors, traits, and roles to individuals based on their perceived gender. These expectations can be restrictive, reinforcing stereotypes and prescribing certain behaviors or interests for males and females. For example, the stereotype that women are nurturing and emotional and should focus on caregiving roles while men are strong and should be providers and earn money for the family can limit individuals' choices and opportunities. There are also gender stereotypes in online gaming, much like Western society stereotypes. For example, women are casual or non-serious gamers, while men are seen as more competitive and skilled. Another common portrayal is that women are seen as damsels in distress, and men are white knights coming to save said damsel in distress (Gauntlett, 2008).

Within the gaming communities, there are also various interesting stereotypes that have been circulating the internet such as “gamer girls”, “incels, and “simps”. The stereotype of the "gamer girl" refers to the belief that women who participate in gaming or identify as gamers are not genuine or serious about their interest in gaming and are just gaming for attention and money and to favor the male gaze (Ewoldsen et al, 2022). This stereotype often undermines the skills and knowledge of female gamers, and this terminology is seen as a negative way of describing a girl/woman that partakes in gaming. It is often used as an insult to be called a gamer girl and it's used for mockery within gaming communities. "Incels" stands for "involuntary celibates" and it is a stereotype that promotes harmful ideologies and is seen as the most extreme stereotype in online gaming communities (Sugiura, 2021). The stereotype is seen as toxic and as “women haters” and express great hostility to women but also to others that do favor women. The term "simp" is considered someone who goes to great lengths to gain the attention, affection, or validation of another person (typically a woman), often to an excessive or exaggerated degree. The term is often used to ridicule or mock men who express kindness, support, or admiration towards women (Sugiura, 2021). While calling someone a “simp” can sometimes be used as a joke, it can also perpetuate negative attitudes towards healthy expressions of affection and reinforce toxic masculinity that discourages vulnerability or emotional connection as it is seen as something negative (Sugiura, 2021). These three gender

stereotypes of gamer girls, incels, and simps are the most tangible stereotypes in gaming communities now.

2.4. How has the concept of gender changed throughout history?

The concept of gender in the perspective of history is complicated and has undergone signification transformations and growths towards both equality and inequality. Geographies of sexualities started to emerge from roughly the 1980's and the past few decades this has developed rapidly and in normal society everyday social spaces are labeled with sexual norms of how to behave and how to act in public (Brown et al, 2012). Meaning that spaces are in fact sexualized based on where you would be located geographically as well, some ways of behaving are simply socially unacceptable or are frowned upon.

The social construct of society causes us to act in certain ways in public or at home, but how does this apply to the online world where the social construct is not per se reinforced or clear to the player (Brown et al, 2012). If a certain gender is sexualized online, it raises the question how it would affect how we behave/act towards this gender online as well if the societal constructs are removed. Dixon & Jones (2015) speak about the spatial dimensions and how feminist geographers have aimed to transform certain questions of where work takes place and how genders are treated differently depending on the space. Feminist geographers have brought light to women's contribution to economy, and they are continuously researching new domains of women's positioning in societies (Dixon & Jones, 2015).

In recent years, there has been an increasing global movement in the forms of activism and also acceptance of gender diversity where many societies have moved towards recognizing legal rights and protections for transgender and non-binary individuals, including the right to legal gender recognition and access to healthcare but still not everywhere. One could argue that the concept of gender has been influenced by cultural imperialism throughout history, naturally in many complex ways. Cultural imperialism refers to the spread and dominance of one culture over others, often accompanied by power imbalances and the imposition of cultural values and norms (Demont-Heinrich, 2011). In the context of gender, cultural imperialism and the dominant gender views of the Western culture has arguably played a role in shaping and transforming understandings of gender roles, identities, and expectations across different societies globally as well.

2.5. How is gender generally represented in online games?

In World of Warcraft, the consensus is that the players in the game are of the male gender in real life. For the larger percentage of the players in WoW, this is correct, however there is also a decent percentage of female players. Roughly 58% of the World of Warcraft population is male, 36% is female and the remainder is non-binary as of 2022 with an average player age of 32 (Pilipovic, 2022). Throughout the years, the female protagonists and female characters were often portrayed sexualized or were shown as “damsels in distress” meaning that the male main protagonist often would have to save a female character (Malkowski & Russworm, 2017). This image of women needing to be saved or being powerless has caused women to be stereotyped as weak within games and are often seen as lesser skilled players than men with their capabilities to play games. A lot of women have experienced a hostile gaming environment, where they either feel singled out by the ones around them or are treated unfairly (Mueller, 2015). While female protagonists in games are often portrayed as “weak” in skimpy outfits or a dress; male protagonists are often portrayed as “strong” and “powerful” in tough and impenetrable armor ready for battle. Which would address stereotypical definitions of masculinity and femininity as addressed in one of the previous paragraphs. Only in more recent years are videogame makers trying to balance this image that both genders can be strong and independent protagonists. A good example of this could be seen in WoW itself, throughout the beginning of the lore and the game it was mostly male protagonists that were “saving the world”; however, in recent expansions, we are seeing a shift from this to more female protagonists playing the lead roles as well. A lot of female developers and content streamers have been actively trying to raise awareness about this throughout the years and are still aiming on making the gaming community a more inclusive place for all genders (Malkowski & Russworm, 2017).

This goes further into the topic of hypermasculinity and hyper femininity, both concepts are applied within gaming environments as much as it is often portrayed within the media and commercials. The “hyper” forms of masculinity and femininity refers to the exaggerated image of the genders in primarily media but also within games. It refers to the most extreme ideals of masculinity and femininity, where a man is portrayed as strong, aggressive, and providing identity. While with hyper femininity the woman is portrayed more caring, weak, focusing on sexual reproductive aspects of a feminine body, and in need of aid (Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies, 2009). Subconsciously, this could influence the community that is exposed to these views as well as it is a constant representation of the two genders in its most extreme forms.

We are now seeing that more and more people are attempting to make a living off online streaming activities such as Twitch and OnlyFans and representing sex online is becoming a widely more accepted/spoken about thing in current society. With OnlyFans often being exclusively associated with content from women. In Twitch streaming, the most popular platform to stream gaming activities, 78.36% of the streamers are male and 19.64% of the streamers are female making it a more male dominated platform to stream content (Streamscheme, 2022). Currently, in the top 20 twitch streamers, we see that there are two female streamers in the top twenty and the remainder of them are male (Patterson, 2022). It is currently still unclear what percentage is male and female in all platforms that are used for streaming, however women are generally sexualized more or are sexually discriminated against on Twitch just because of their gender with several bigger cases against women like Gamergate, even if they do not stream sexual content (Lorenz, 2020). Amouranth is a streamer that is in the top 20 streamers with 6 million followers and is infamous for streaming highly sexualized content and being banned for it (Patterson, 2022). We are continuously researching physical geographical spaces and how sexuality is represented in that physical environment, however these online geographical environments (especially the gaming ones) are just as important. Especially as we are seeing such a divide between only already men and women represented online, it is an area that seems necessary to further explore.

2.6. Identity Formation in Online Settings

Identity formation refers to someone's construction of their own identity, this can be considered a complex process with various forces that influence one's identity. Everyone's experience is unique and processes their own identity differently, for that reason it is important to view this as an intricate development of one's journey through life and needs to be viewed rather subjectively with the support of more practical and objective theories (Cherry, 2022). Identities are formed on several levels, it can be on levels such as cultural identity, professional identity, ethnic identity, religious identity, gender identity, political identity, and disability identity and forming all these kinds of identities can be a confusing process for individuals to go through. According to Erikson's theory of psychological development, all adolescents must go through a stage of identity versus role confusion to understand their own psychological development and understand their sense of self (Cherry, 2022). According to Erikson, this happens most between the age of 12 and 18 where one starts to ask questions such as "who am I and what is my purpose?" and without going through this phase it will be harder to create your own self-

identity and find your direction through life. One of the main elements in Erikson's theory within this stage is the development of one's ego identity, specifically referring to how we as humans have social interactions with others (Cherry, 2022). This will change constantly while one is in this stage of "identity versus role confusion" as a person is constantly exposed to new experiences, of which some can be extremely opposite of the other. Creating a sense of identity involves exposing oneself to experiences, relationships, values, beliefs, and memories which is extremely subjective to any person, meaning that not one of us will have the exact same development and then the aspect of nature versus nurture also comes in to further complicate the process of creating an identity within society. Once one has created a sense of self-identity and has been able to go through the challenges of what it means to create an identity, they will feel a stronger sense of self which can assist them going through society. If one does not complete this stage, they can be left in confusion for years without being able to continue the next stages of their psychosocial development according to Erikson's theory (Cherry, 2022). With the media containing so many images of women and men, and messages about sexuality and identity today, it is highly unlikely that these ideas would have no impact on our own sense of identity (Gauntlett, 2008).

So, how would this apply in online gaming communities? Where players do not actually encounter others within their physical representation of themselves? Among online gaming communities, we do see that people identify themselves with a different category that we have not addressed here yet. The construction of a gamer identity is a tangible phenomenon that you can see within gaming as well, not everyone even considers themselves a gamer and it also happens where others may be shamed when they call themselves a gamer when they may not "belong" making it a somewhat inflexible and closed off identity to associate oneself with (Howe et al, 2019). Gamers are also exposed to games' environment of which developers have created a world through how they envision a certain world and environment to look with its own political and social system constructed. Meaning that gamers also must filter out these factors when they are creating a sense of self in addition to what may happen in real life as well, which may be additionally polarizing and confusing if one feels like they do not belong. Gamers also do not communicate face-to-face, taking away a large portion of self-identity of one's self-image. The communication is more focused towards computer mediated communication rather than regular mediated communication or face-to-face communication.

2.7. Conclusion

Gender is a widely researched phenomenon and in current day society gender is more blurred than anything. This literature review primarily focused on the genders of male and female and more specifically investigated masculinity and femininity for genders and social roles within society. The construct of creating sense of gender is heavily dependent on different cultures and will have various characteristics within these cultures and can raise the question of cultural imperialism. Not only does gender identity contribute to one's larger sense of identity, but we also all have our own subjective journey on how we got through life which affects one's identity formation. It will be interesting to see if there is a difference or correlation between identity formation with gamers and with regular people in society.

An online gaming environment with the developers' portrayal of gender will cause a gaming community to almost create its own culture, and we could therefore virtually consider the World of Warcraft community to have its own culture with its own representation of gender thus having its own journey to shape an identity potentially. Games have often been projected to represent gender through the "male" gaze, presuming that most players would be male. We know based on statistics that a decent percentage of gamers are female as well. All these players live in a world created by developers, that have a specific way of seeing gender themselves. So, how do these concepts and this own culture reflect gender identity for its players? Are they affected by the online representation of masculinity and femininity? Or do real life societal norms for gender continue to persist? How do the players then actually really experience masculinity and femininity online? Is this different from real life experiences? The rest of this thesis will now dive into analyzing exactly that.

3. Research Objectives and Questions

3.1. Management question

How is the concept and challenges surrounding the topic of gender, specifically on masculinity and femininity, experienced by female and male gamers between the ages of 18 – 34 when they are online in MMORPGs such as World of Warcraft?

3.2. The goal of the research

The goal of this research is to identify if there are differences on how female and male gamers experience the concept and challenges of gender in online gaming communities. With the goal of providing an in-depth qualitative perspective on the topic through having the researcher be in the gaming environment and interviewing gamers in the game. The research wishes to identify various viewpoints on gender by looking into gender equality, gender stereotypes, and harassment in relation to existing literature.

3.3. Research objective and questions

The research that was conducted aimed to answer the management question by answering a set of sub-questions. These sub-questions are derived from the literature review.

- How do men and women view gender and gender stereotypes online?
- How is masculinity and femininity represented in World of Warcraft by the digital environment of the game?
- How is gender equality translated in online gaming communities?
- What are the challenges surrounding the concept of gender in the perspective of the players?

4. Data Collection and Methodology

4.1. The Research – An Empirical Study of Online Gaming

The purpose of this research was to explore how gamers experience the concept and challenges of gender in online gaming communities such as World of Warcraft. More specifically, to explore the topics of masculinity and femininity for gamers. Most of this research has been conducted in the spring and autumn of 2022 and partially during the spring of 2023 and the research existed of qualitative research methods. Due to the nature of this research focusing on digital communication and digital communities, the research has been conducted digitally and within the online environment of World of Warcraft. The researcher was situated in Norway and Sweden and interviewed various participants digitally on the European servers of the game World of Warcraft. A variety of gamers have been interviewed for this research with various nationalities and ages between 18 – 34, both of which were male and female using a random sampling method for picking participants. Gamers of varying skills levels have conveniently partaken in this research including both “casual” gamers and “hardcore” gamers. Both men and women have been interviewed and a total of 20 gamers partook in this research of which 13 were male and 7 were female, their identities will remain anonymous for the continuation of this paper.

This research utilized one qualitative research method by focusing on in-depth semi-structured interviews that allowed data to be generated about personal experiences surrounding gender identity to reflect this in the discussion section. To answer the research question and achieve the goal of this research, the research took on an exploratory research angle to focus on the deep and nuanced exploration of individuals' experiences, perceptions, and attitudes. Following an exploratory qualitative research approach allowed the researcher to gather rich and detailed data by conducting semi-structured interviews in participants' natural gaming environments. This approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of how gender is represented and understood within gaming communities but also had its limitation and complication with the analysis of the data. Implementing an exploratory qualitative research approach assisted the researcher to gain additional insights into the social, cultural, and contextual factors that influence gender dynamics in online gaming communities and explore the topic of cultural imperialism to see the relevance of the theory. Choosing a qualitative instead of a quantitative approach allows for the exploration of personal meanings and interpretations that gamers attach to gender representations, as well as the social norms, and community dynamics that shape these representations and that would be harder to conduct with

a quantitative research approach, thus the reason to focus on exploratory qualitative research. Additionally, exploratory qualitative research does not start with pre-determined hypotheses or theories but allows themes and patterns to emerge from the data which is what the research did but also posed as a challenge to identify relevant theories and patterns post research. This approach is suitable for uncovering new insights and generating hypotheses that can inform further research or theory development in the field of gender representation in gaming which can be found later in this document. The interviews were transcribed, and various themes emerged from this transcription which can also be found later in the thesis.

4.2. Positionality

The positionality of the researcher is an important limitation to be aware of within this research as this paper aims to explore the experiences from both the male and female perspective. The researcher identifies as female and was also portrayed as a female character in the game when approaching potential participants for the research. Due to the candidates being aware of the gender of the researcher and this research being about gender, the results and analysis of this paper will have a margin of error that is required to be accounted for. Additionally, some of the participants that partook in this research were also in closer personal relationships with the researcher which will also affect the end results of this research. Many of the participants, however, did not know the researcher which allows this research and document to remain valid.

As the researcher is closely involved with this specific gaming community, the document may also have an additional margin of error due to personal bias towards the community and its members. As when researchers become part of a community, they may develop a particular perspective or bias influenced by their experiences within that community. This, in turn, can impact data interpretation and analysis, potentially narrowing the scope of understanding or overlooking alternative perspectives that should be kept into consideration when reading this document. It is both an important limitation and advantage for this research as the researcher knew a lot about the community beforehand. The advantage of this positionality allowed this research to have been finished in time, however without the bias it could have been more credible research and potentially allowed different conclusions to be drawn by someone with a neutral stance.

The researcher attempted to research both factions within the game, however most of the participants were primarily from one faction. As mentioned earlier, the game has two factions; Horde and Alliance and this research had a larger focus on players that played within

the Alliance faction. The researcher attempted to reach out to participants with a Night Elf Female, when conducting the research which belongs to the Alliance faction. Do note that in the current state of the game as of 2023 factions can cross-collaborate, yet most of the interested participants were still Alliance. Being a character of one specific faction and race may also bring its limitations as there are now currently 24 playable races. The researcher tried to be as objective as possible in the communication towards the participants by following the interview guide that can be found in Appendix 1, however it is important to remember that subjective opinions will have come through as well undoubtedly.

4.3. Study Site

The study site of this research was the digital in-game environment of World of Warcraft on European servers. The server that was picked was one of the most populous European servers and it was called “Silvermoon”. Additionally, the researcher also tried to conduct research within one of the biggest roleplaying servers called “Argent Dawn”, however findings were extremely diverse making it challenging to draw conclusions from such opposite realms which this document will explain later. The researcher positioned themselves in the game in a larger “city” within the game where there would be a lot of players and then the researcher reached out through one of the communication channels within the game. The city that was used was “Stormwind City” on the “Alliance” faction of the game and to attempt to find participants the researcher communicated through the “General Chat” and direct messages, and this was in the “Silvermoon” server. “Stormwind City” is known to be one of the social hubs for regular players and you also get to reach all other big cities in the game through the general chat function. For the “Argent Dawn” server, the researcher approached “Goldshire” in “Elwynn Forest” which is known to be a roleplaying hub for “Alliance” players.

4.4. Study population and sampling

For this research, two primary study populations have been used to gather the data. In table 4.1 you will be able to find which two study populations that have been approached throughout the research period along with a short description of each study population. For most study populations, a purposive and simple random sampling methods were used. Purposive sampling is a type of non-probability sampling techniques and was chosen for the specific study populations as it allows to purposefully pick study groups that are relevant for this research (Kumar, 2018, p. 207). While the simple random sampling method is a type of probability

sampling that allows for random participants to be chosen, the main criteria for this method was that the participant had to be between the age of 18 – 34.

For this research, only qualitative research methods have been used, however a quantitative approach could be beneficial for further research.

Table 4.1: Study Population and Sampling Method

Study Population Type	Description of the Study Population	Quantitative/Qualitative	Sampling Method
Male Gamers	This population functioned as one of the most important study populations; the primary conclusions surrounding experiences on gender identity were derived from the findings from this study population.	Qualitative	Purposive/Simple Random Sampling
Female Gamers	This population functioned as one of the most important study populations; the primary conclusions surrounding experiences on gender identity were derived from the findings from this study population.	Qualitative	Purposive/Simple Random Sampling
Documents and records	Documents and records surrounding relevant theories and themes in relation to this topic were analyzed and cross referenced with other studies to determine the credibility of this research. A combination of purposive sampling and quota sampling was used to gather data from this study population to validate findings from the research.	Qualitative	Purposive Sampling/ Quota Sampling

4.5. Sample Size

The sample size existed out of 20 gamers in total, with 7 of them being female and 13 of them being male that have been interviewed with a qualitative research approach. This sample size does not represent the entire research population, and due to limitations within the research this was not the ideal sample size for this research and could have been higher to draw various conclusions.

Table 4.2: Sample Size of Data.

Study Population	Research on Study Population	Data Collection Method	Total Sample Size
Male Gamers	this study population was <i>interviewed</i> .	• Semi-structured interviews	13
Female Gamers	this study population was <i>interviewed</i> .	• Semi-structured interviews	7
Total			20

4.6. Data collection methods – Semi Structured Interviews

Semi-Structured Interviews

The semi-structured interview followed an interview guide rather than an interview schedule. This means that prior to the interviews, an overview of questions had been shaped; however, the interviewer was not restricted by the questions on the list and asked various questions outside of the interview guide (Hay, 2016, p.158). The idea was to generate creative ideas with the participants and allow for additional data and insights to be generated that was perhaps not planned for initially. During the semi-structured interviews, it was essential that the interviewer familiarized themselves with different types of prompt questions such as clarification, nudging, and summarizing kinds of questions (Hay, 2016, p. 157). During the interviews, the researcher took notes and requested to record the interview so that it could be analyzed with color coding after the interviews took place to identify patterns in the experiences of players. Using semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher and the participants to speak more freely and allow the sparring of ideas as well. The researcher tried as much to not interfere, however related quite often with the female perspective of the answers she received as the researcher has been exposed to a similar environment for 17 years. It was important here for the researcher to remain objective and not get carried away with her own subjective experiences within the same community.

This touches upon both the strength and weakness of this data collection method. One of the weaknesses is that it can quickly generate subjective viewpoints from the researcher due to having been involved with the community prior to the research as the researcher is not extensively trained to remain unbiased. Another weakness is that it was an extremely timely process to interview all the participants and due to the nature of a semi-structured interview the conversations often got sidetracked leading to more transcribing time. Another weakness was the way the questions were posed, the researcher attempted to not ask leading follow-up questions based on responses however did not always succeed (FuelCycle, 2022).

Some of the strengths of this data collection method was that it opened the opportunity for new insights that the researcher may have not been aware off. The questions were prepared beforehand allowing the researcher to at least gain some specific insights on topics that were relevant for this thesis paper. This data collection method also allowed the researcher to get a lot more personal with the participants, allowing the researcher to get to deeper and more complicated issues occasionally which was relevant for this research and contributed to the discussion of this thesis.

4.7. Data processing and analysis

In table 4.2 you can see the listed data collection methods and their analyzing tools. Each method required a different method of analysis; color coding and transcribing have been the most relevant tools for this research to determine reoccurring themes.

Table 4.3: Data Processing and Analysis

Data Collection Method	Gathering Tool	Analyzing Tool
Semi-structured interviews	Notes, recordings	For the semi-structured interviews, the interviews needed to be recorded and afterwards transcribed. After transcribing, the text was analyzed using color coding. The data was listed in a Microsoft Excel document and each response received an appropriate color. The colors were predetermined to a sub-question prior to interviewing the participants. The number of

		<p>colors would depend on the number of categories.</p> <p>Transcribing, color coding</p>
Documents and records	Websites, articles, web journals, academic articles, books	<p>For the analysis of the documents and records; different sources related to gender identity were compared and analyzed. Comparing various theories and gender studies to find a correlation with the research findings.</p> <p>Comparing patterns</p>

4.8. Quality Assurance

Reliability and validity are two important factors when conducting research and are important principles to adhere to when translating the gathered research data into an appropriate research report/master's thesis. Kumar (2018) describes reliability as; "Reliability is the ability of a research instrument to provide similar results when used repeatedly under similar conditions. Reliability indicates accuracy, stability, and predictability of a research instrument: the higher the reliability, the higher the accuracy; or the higher the accuracy of an instrument, the higher its reliability." (p. 396). To increase the reliability of this research:

- The sample size of the study populations was of an appropriate size; it is important to gather data from different kinds of people (both female and male with different backgrounds) to ensure that the data varies, and different perspectives are taken into consideration.
- Occasionally, a peer student assisted in proof reading, assessing the data, and formulating ideas surrounding the topic of gender identity which allowed for a second opinion on the data, thus increasing reliability.
- The data has been analyzed through the triangulation method which means that data is gathered from the academic sources and the common findings of this gathered data will be checked with data that is gathered in the field (in-depth semi structured interviews). Once the data is compared, the gathered data in the field might confirm the common insights from the academic data or it might refute the insights. In case of the latter, both

the data sources will need to be thoroughly analyzed and additional academic sources need to be gathered to see if this might prove either of the data sources. If this disproves a certain theory, those findings might get discarded or will be integrated into the case study lightly.

To ensure validity of the report:

- The conclusions that were made in this thesis were based on the literature review and on the data gathered from the study populations.
- The number of sources used also contributes to increasing the validity of the final product. The sources used preferably should not date prior to 1997.
- The interview used for gathering data was first reviewed by the thesis supervisor to ensure that the questions of the interviews allowed the desired data to be gathered. This further ensured construct validity of the research.

4.9. Ethical Considerations

When studying a specific community, it is crucial to consider ethical considerations and ensure the well-being and privacy of participants that partake in the research. Researchers need to obtain informed consent, protect participant confidentiality, and maintain ethical standards throughout the research process following a set of procedures set out by the Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD). Even with proper ethical protocols in place, there may still be limitations in ensuring full transparency and minimizing any potential harm or unintended consequences to the researched community. As this research focused on the opinions of participants and the knowledge of the respondents. To conduct this research, several principles had to be followed to not breach the privacy of the people involved. If the participants voiced any concerns throughout the research period, the research was placed on hold to identify the issue and took steps from there whether to include this participant or not.

Confidentiality and privacy

As qualitative research is often characterized with personal questions and observing people in people's private space, it was important to not breach someone's privacy despite not having had physical contact with the participants it was still a priority (Hay, 2016, 31). To ensure anonymity of the study population that wished to remain anonymous a confidentiality clause was formulated and had to be signed by everyone that participated in the research (see appendix 2). Furthermore, prior to starting the research, the research plan needed to be formally approved by the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU). All data from the

interviews was formally deleted two months after the research period. Prior to sharing the data, each participant was formally informed and requested if they agreed with the submission of the research for educative purposes.

Informed consent

Prior to each interview, the participants needed to provide written consent that they agreed with the interview being recorded and conducted. The participants received a copy of the consent paper for them to keep digitally. As deception is a common issue among qualitative research, it was fundamental that the participants knew exactly what the purpose of the research was and how the data was used (Hay, 2016, p. 32). All the participants were encouraged to remain anonymous as this thesis does not wish to put anyone at harm and wanted to gather brittle and sincere experiences from its participants.

Harm

As researchers have an ethical responsibility to ensure the well-being and safety of participants of their research. It was found that the direction of the interview often went towards online harassment and gender-based violence with the participants and prompting further questions surrounding these topics can potentially expose participants to further harm or trauma. Thus, it was extremely important to minimize risks for the participants, ensuring full confidentiality, and to protect the participants' privacy. It became a fundamental rule for the researcher that none of the participants or the interviewers were exposed to any harm and the participants were highly encouraged only to share experiences that they felt comfortable sharing. If any of the participants voiced any concerns, the interview needed to be terminated immediately and relevant safety procedures were acted upon. This was for both the participants and the interviewers, thankfully this did not occur during the interviews and the interviews were disposed of safely according to the Norwegian Center for Research Data and the institutes regulations.

5. Data Analysis

5.1. Semi-Structured Interviews

The semi-structured interview provided insights on the topics that required data to answer the research questions, all the participants were asked the same questions and each interview lasted for about 45 minutes as many of the participants were asked different follow-up questions based on their answers. Therefore, causing a slight variation in the responses. As mentioned before, 20 interviews were conducted in total with 13 of them being men and 7 of them being female. Each person had a different background, different age, had played the game and been part of the community at a different intensity and all brought interesting personal experiences to the interview. The age of the respondents was between 18 and 34. Ideally, more participants would have partaken in this research, however due to time constraints this was unfortunately not possible. The mean age of World of Warcraft players is 31.29 so the range of players interviewed would come close to the average study population (Venn et al, 2020). It was significantly more complicated to get female gamers to partake in the research than male gamers as there were less responses from females than males when reaching out to the target population. Thus, the reasons for purposive sampling so that also female participants were scouted to partake in the research.

When analyzing the results, the themes used to attempt to answer the sub-questions were as follows: “stereotyping”, “online representation of gender”, “male view on gender”, “female view on gender”, “personal experiences and challenges”.

General Questions: All of participants were asked the same questions at the start to figure out more about the targeted population and whether the participant was male or female. It was also to determine how long the participants have played the game for to see if there would be a correlation or difference between gamers that play the game extensively and those that play less. Based on the analysis of the results, this did not bring too many variations to the experiences of gamers. It was to be perceived that potentially that gamers that spent more time in the online gaming communities would have a different view on gender, however there was no direct correlation between hours spent online and their views on gender.

General Gender Questions: After having asked the general questions, the interview proceeded into more detailed questions about gender questions to try and identify how the participants interpreted the concept of gender and their ideologies around it. The first question in this section was “what do you think of the concept of gender in current day society” and gave a few varying insights that primarily went into the complexity of gender in current day

society. Most of the applicants expressed that it was complicated to determine gender and that gender was something experienced by oneself. Few of the participants also did not answer this question with too much context and mentioned that it is, and I quote, “I don’t think about it too much, it is whatever how people identify as nowadays”. Which was a peculiar answer to the question, however most of the participants answered slightly carefully about describing gender. As this question did not give too many insights, a follow-up question was asked to some; “what is the difference between someone’s gender and someone’s sex?”. This gave some more insights as most associated someone’s sex to be their biological characteristics and gender what people identify as, which would further align with the literature review.

The official second question “what do you think does it mean to be a man?” dived straight into the topic of masculinity and how the participants would respond to a bolder question. Some jokes were made by some of the male participants, answers such as “to be strong and manly of course!” was mentioned by one of the participants followed by some laughter. Which was perceived to be an intriguing answer the male participants went into many physical attributes of “being a strong man” while the female participants went more into the mental aspect of things of being more dominant and some physical biological aspects. The participants were encouraged to think about the following aspects after giving their initial answer to further provoke their thought process; “Think of values, principles, ways of acting, behavior, etc.” Some of the participants were also asked to

The third question was the same question as the second question however then towards what it means to be a woman, the participants were also asked to think about values, principles, behavior, and ways of acting after they gave their initial answer. The participants joked a bit less here and seemed to find it harder to define what it meant to be a woman. Some went into certain online stereotypes such as “E-girls” and “UwU-girls”, this was mentioned by both male and female participants. The participants seemed to find it hard to answer this question, however.

Specific Gaming Questions: Then the next set of questions went further into the gaming community itself, as there is a wide availability of literature available about gender, the interview spent most of its time on this section of the interview.

The first question was an extensive question that tried to ask the participants about gender stereotypes in online gaming. Depending how extensively the participants would answer more follow-up questions would be asked. The main question asked lists as follows “what kind of gender stereotypes are you aware of in online games?” most of the participants named the following stereotypes: “Simps”, “Gamer Girl”, “Incels” and these seemed to be

recurring stereotypes among most participants. After identifying this, the participants were asked if they have encountered the stereotypes while they were playing the game online which most of them confirmed to have encountered. The participants were then asked as well how their encounters have been, to see if their presumptions about the stereotypes were confirmed. It was also asked to determine the behavior of the stereotypes and to see how different participants thought about the behaviors. This question then continued to ask how these stereotypes translate to the outside world and if they feel like they could relate to the stereotypes too. Some of the participants expressed that they did sometimes get into the “persona” of some of the stereotypes which will be further expressed in the discussion section. This question took a deep dive into stereotypes which aimed to answer one of the sub-questions for this research, therefore a lot of time was spent on this extensive question in each interview.

The second and third question were similar and went into how masculinity and femininity was expressed in World of Warcraft. It went both into how the protagonists are portrayed in cinematics and how the non-playable characters (NPCs) were expressed in the game. Most of the participants answered very similar here and mentioned that most of the male characters looked heroic and strong, with the NPCs often doing “men jobs”. While the female characters were often portrayed in more sexual outfits and being more in the background of the game as side characters and not the main protagonist.

The third question was asked to try and identify the difference between men and women portrayed online and in real life and was as follows “do you feel like there is a difference in being a man/woman online compared to real life?”. Varying answers came out of this question and quite opposite answers too from both genders. Some found the difference between online and in real to be slight and like each other, others thought the exact opposite.

The fourth question: “do you feel like you have to alter the way you express yourself to others depending on another person’s gender?” went specifically into how the participants experience their own identity when they are with the opposite gender online. Additionally, a follow-up question was asked if they ever changed their own behavior when they were gaming no matter what gender was there. Most of the male respondents answered that they would never change how they express themselves online, while the female respondents answered similar, they still mentioned that they do alter their behavior more often than the male respondents when encountering the opposite gender.

The fourth question: “have you ever had or seen negative experiences surrounding any gender in World of Warcraft?” was to identify if the respondents have experienced negative behavior firsthand either towards themselves or towards others while they were gaming. All

the participants mentioned that they have seen it, with all the female participants having had bad experiences surrounding their own gender when they were gaming online, especially of voice communication tools such as on the platform Discord. Some additional follow-up questions were asked about the experiences and the participants were asked if they felt comfortable sharing the experiences for them to be used for this research. Their experiences will remain anonymous for the analysis section.

6. Discussion

6.1. Stereotypes in Online Games

This theme was identified to attempt to answer the research question surrounding “how do men and women view gender and gender stereotypes online?” Based on the questions asked throughout the interview, three recurring stereotypes were identified just as written in the literature review throughout the interviews, and the participants were asked to describe each of the stereotypes to see how often they would encounter the stereotypes and also if their views aligned with what was written about the stereotypes prior to this research. The stereotypes that were identified were “Simps”, “Gamer Girl”, and “Incels” and this section will further explain how the participants experienced these stereotypes in the digital constructs of World of Warcraft.

Gamer Girl was described by the participants as a female gamer that would be portraying herself in a cute and oversexualized way. A girl that is hyperactive, has a sweet voice, is extremely caring, and is a very feminine interpretation of a woman. None of the participants seemed to be particularly fond of the stereotype and many expressed them to be the “worst” and most “annoying” people within the game. The male participants mentioned that they found their sweet innocent aesthetic somewhat appealing, but most of them found “gamer girls” to be attention seeking. The female participants expressed an annoyance with the stereotype for several reasons. They mentioned being stereotyped as an “incompetent gamer girl” quite often or where they were mocked for being “female”. Many of the female respondents expressed that they did not feel comfortable being on voice communication platforms such as online voice chat or Discord just because they do not want to be stereotyped as this and prefer to keep their identities hidden to not be mocked. The male respondents did not express having any issues with gamer girls and identified there to be a difference between the “extreme” gamer girls and just regular girl gamers.

Simps were described by participants as male gamers that would be infatuated by another person, most commonly a female gamer or a female gamer Twitch streamer. The male participants described a “simp” as someone that would do various acts of services to try and gain the affection of the other person. The acts of service could be in various forms such as: helping the other person with content within the game, buying in-game gifts, sending real money donations, but also as simple as just giving a lot of verbal affection to the other person. The female participants explained a similar phenomenon and mentioned being “placed on a pedestal” by another male player. One of the female participants also referred to it as “some of

the men act as if we are damsels in distress in games, as if we need a white knight in shiny armor to come by to help us play the game”. Most of the participants expressed that being a “simp” is a negative thing, and among the male participants it is often meant as an insulting joke to their friends when someone is “simping” a girl. On the streaming platform “Twitch”, the word simp is also officially banned, meaning that if anyone uses it in the chats of streamers the user will get banned as well for a limited amount of time. One of the female participants also admitted to enjoying the attention of simps, this female participant streams as well on Twitch and mentioned that it was an easy way of getting more donations during her streams.

*Incel*s were described as men that are extremely hostile towards women online. The participants described incels as men that would verbally abuse women in online games just because they would identify as a woman or have a female voice. None of the participants liked this stereotype and mentioned that they like to stay away from this stereotype as well. One of the male participants mentioned that one of his close friends has a similar mindset as this stereotype and he expressed that he was often nervous whenever a female gamer would be in their team as he would get verbally abusive with her. Two of the female participants have encountered the verbal abuse of this supposed stereotype firsthand and they expressed having been met with verbal sexual abuse and sexist comments. One mentioned that she should “uninstall the game because she was such a horrendous player” while remaining quiet most of the group experience.

One of the participants mentioned never having encountered any of the stereotypes but being aware of them. He mentioned that he was a solo player and tends to stick by himself by not interfering too much with the online community in the game. Another participant mentioned she liked to take on the personality of the “gamer girl” stereotype as she said it was nice to try and connect to people where people thought she was cute and innocent. Based on the answers from the participants, these are the most extreme stereotypes you could find within the community, which does not represent most of the community. With “gamer girls” and “simps” being the most common one, the female participants mentioned being generalized as a gamer girl extremely fast. All, except one, of the participants mentioned as well that they would not change their identity or behavior if they met the opposite gender when they were gaming. As most of the participants did identify stereotypes but did not feel like they had to change their gender, with this theme it was hard to identify if the participants would be adapting to a different gender identity.

Based on the answers here, we can distinctly see that there are certain identities created within online gaming communities that may not actually be there in real life constructs especially if gamers associate themselves with these stereotypes. This also can contribute to adding a more complex journey when it comes to gamers discovering their self-identity as mentioned in the literature review.

6.2. Online Representation of Genders - Oversexualization

The theme of oversexualization was identified to assist in answering the sub-question “how is masculinity and femininity represented in games such as World of Warcraft by the digital environment of the game?” which went more into the game design by the developers of the game and the interview attempted participants to look at the characters within the game rather than their own experiences with gender. All the participants had a consensus of one thing, female characters and protagonists were portrayed as “curvy” and more “attractive” women within the game. It was mentioned by one of the participants as “they are portrayed as the current day beauty standards, wide hips, bigger boobs, and a pretty sleek face”. The armor and clothes that the characters wear in the game is also more focused on being “sexy” and to accentuate the figures of the protagonists. The answers from the participants are in a sense referring to the game design of male and female characters in World of Warcraft noting that the design of characters and races are maybe like Western traditional gender norms and stereotypes that would further encourage the idea of cultural imperialism. To be a “curvy woman” and to be a “strong muscular man”. Characteristically, as a fact of how the game has been shaped for the past 20 years, male characters are typically depicted as muscular, imposing, and physically dominant, while female characters often emphasize slender figures, exaggerated curves, and sexualized attire which is also what the participants referred to. This design approach from developers focuses on traditional notions of masculinity and femininity, highlighting physical attributes associated with each gender in the most basic of senses and not capturing the full range of physical attributes.

The female characters in general do not have too big of a role within the narrative of the game, especially not within the earlier content expansions and are more side characters. The participants also all agreed that the male characters look more “heroic” and feel more “masculine” when you see them. The armor and clothes that the male characters wear looks “intimidating”, and the male characters are all portrayed as muscular strong men. Generally, it is a male protagonist that is the lead role within the content expansions. The participants did

note down a shift with the lead protagonist in the latest expansion, they mentioned that that protagonist was female called Sylvanas Windrunner, and she was quoted to be a “heroic and sexy elf”.

Some of the participants also mentioned an interesting phenomenon, where they referred to the female stereotype being a “Markmanship Hunter” or a “Holy Priest” and that many women take on the role of the “Support” class. The support class, also known as a “healer” typically tends to injured players in the party. With this answer, the participants were prompted to answer if there were any stereotype male roles, and some mentioned it being a “Protection Warrior” which is a “Tank” class that aims to protect the party from damage. This was interesting to see how the mentality of some of the participants would also go into gender stereotypes for within the game. Where the man is in a protecting role, and the woman is in a caring, supportive role.

Based on the responses of the participants, we can argue that within World of Warcraft, there are forms of hyper femininity and hyper masculinity. Hyper femininity and masculinity, in this case, refers to the extreme portrayal of the two genders, often emphasizing stereotypical gender traits and appearances. In World of Warcraft, there are examples of hyper femininity and hyper masculinity in the design of many of the female and male characters like this Sylvanas Windrunner. For the portrayal of hyper femininity, you can find this in the game through characters who have exaggerated hourglass figures, revealing or sexualized outfits, and extreme feminine features such as large eyes, perfect skin, and long flowing hair. For the portrayal of hyper masculinity, you can see this in the game through emphasized traits associated with strength, aggression, and dominance. These characters often possess heavily muscular bodies, broad shoulders, and imposing stances. They may also exhibit exaggerated masculine features such as facial hair, deep voices, and aggressive combat animations.

6.3. View of Gender Online

Male view on gender: This theme that was identified would assist in answering the question of “how do men and women view gender and gender stereotypes online?”. With this theme, specifically the side of the male view on gender and how they may experience gender. Men expressed some jokes about the male gender, mentioning that they had to be “strong” and “tough” with how they are expressed. They mentioned being verbally more dominant and the peak masculinity would be having a lot of muscles, however many also mentioned that they did not really associate with this form of masculinity. Two mentioned that it does not really

matter too much if you express yourself comfortably and that you are open-minded, this will apply for both femininity and masculinity. When the male participants were asked what they thought of femininity and “what is a woman” they were a bit more hesitant to respond. One mentioned that they have the female reproductive organs quite bluntly, but when asked about transgender women and the transformation of genitalia he mentioned that it was “not the same as a biologically born woman”. Three expressed that women are a bit more emotional than men, and more aligned with their emotions and caring side compared to men. The participants found it hard to describe gender and express their views on gender within this study population. Additionally, the men mentioned that they would take on the role as a “tank” or “damage taker” most often within the gaming environment.

Female view on gender: This theme that was identified would assist in answering the question of “how do men and women view the opposite gender online?”. The female participants mentioned that a masculine figure is more “dominant and hard-headed” in their approaches of life. They mentioned that typically femininity was more focused on softer caring features and that within the game they would often be the class of the “caretakers” or “healers”. One of the female participants did not like this question and mentioned that both males and females can have either more masculine energy than feminine energy and it did per se have to be one or the other. One of the other female participants expressed some frustration towards the male figures that she has encountered online and said that they all try and act “as if they are the coolest, strongest, and most awesome guy in the world” which she expressed as an “unnecessary ego”. Also, for the female participants this was a hard topic to address and not much time was spent on the gender questions. One expressed that “we live in a liberal world, what does it matter what I think about gender, let people be the way they are”.

It is complicated to conclude how men and women view the opposite gender, some of the participants expressed some general forms of masculinity and femininity however not enough to draw proper conclusions. Based on most of the participants being uncertain how to answer this question and a recurring answer being that you can identify yourself how you want, this section will not draw any direct conclusions and further research needs to be conducted. It will be assumed that men and women view gender and gender identity as something that is dependent on how someone feels and how they identify themselves in the constructs of society. Incels were described as a “woman hating” man, all the participants disliked this persona when they or the interviewer mentioned the stereotype.

6.4. Personal Experiences

This theme aimed to look at the bigger scope of the research and would try to contribute directly to the main question of “how is the concept and challenges of gender, specifically masculinity and femininity, experienced by female and male gamers between the ages of 18 – 34 when they are online in MMORPGs such as World of Warcraft?”. The male participants did not have too many experiences they wanted to share, one mentioned that he has been in the simp role stereotype once and expressed it as a heartbreaking experience. He mentioned that he gave so much of himself in the pursuit of trying to find love and he mentioned that he classified himself as a “hopeless romantic”. He encountered a sweet girl online and explained how lovely she was and that he was willing to play the game with her all the time that she was online. They spoke a lot, did a lot of content, and he gave her a lot of attention within the game. He bought her items within the game, helped her with content, prioritized her over his friends, and he then expressed that he gave a lot of himself to just get “ghosted” after the process. His friends had called him out to be a simp several times, but he never admitted to it when his friends called him out. After being “ghosted” by the girl, he mentioned that it was a terrible experience: “almost worse than losing someone in real, as you spend so much time together and connect on a level where you just chat and talk to the other, just for that to get lost in an instant”. The participant agreed that it was alright to write his story.

A similar story of one of the female participants that did classify herself as a “gamer girl” persona occasionally expressed the following. “As a female World of Warcraft player, I feel like I have seen different spectrums of what the online world has to offer and how people treat you when you’re playing online as a woman to often less enjoyable experiences. Not just in World of Warcraft, but in many different online games as well such as Overwatch, Valorant, and Counter Strike. I have been playing World of Warcraft for the past 15 years, I have been able to create an image from my point of view which puts me at the center of this “gamer girl” persona we have been talking about. In recent years, you would think that the severity of the “stereotyping” would decrease, however I experienced quite the contrary. Now that platforms such as Twitch and Discord are so popular which allow you to easily stream to your friends or audience, it further enhanced the stereotype that women already had before. For me, the past 2 years have been especially intense regarding how I am perceived online. Often, people do not believe that I am a female gamer so they would either; place me on a pedestal or would assume that I am not a good player. Most guys tend to have placed me on a pedestal, and several would buy me in-game items or continuously assist me in content in the game which they did not do for their male friends. Once guys find out that I am a female gamer, their behavior tends to

shift to being a lot kinder generally and they become very helpful. This phenomenon where men become extremely fazed by a girl online now often gets referred to as a “simp” which you’ve probably heard off within the online gaming communities. Generally, a simp would be someone that would do almost anything for a girl they meet online, often they would make large donations on Twitch or would stand up for the girl. The word started becoming extremely popular in 2019 and now it is slowly becoming a stereotype as well where men that are “nice” to women online are perceived as “simps” which is now starting to have a negative connotation to it. I have encountered people “simping” to both me and other females plenty of times and it is quite interesting to witness as the girl does not even have to do anything special and they can create this obsession around them. It’s kind of crazy to see, but I am not complaining”. The person that expressed this was content with using it within the research thesis.

Despite not being an initial interview question from the interview guide, the topic of online harassment occurred multiple times throughout the interviews allowing for a slight shift of the direction of this thesis. These forms of experiences are valuable insights for an exploratory qualitative research design. One of the participants that allowed for the sharing of her story described her online harassment encounter as follows from another game that she played; “One evening, I logged into Valorant and joined a match and as soon as my teammates heard my voice through the in-game voice chat, which I don’t always join due to this reason, some of the guys immediately began making rude and sexist comments to me. Saying things like I belong in the kitchen, and that I should uninstall the game because I would suck at the game anyway. Without even having started the match, this was still at the character selection. One person even asked if I was a 12-year-old boy or a gamer girl, just because I am a woman and spoke in comms, I get these kinds of comments. This doesn’t just happen once, but very often, this is usually why I don’t join these kinds of voice channels or pretend to be a guy just to avoid this behavior from others.” This was in a different game than World of Warcraft, and as this study is focused on World of Warcraft the participant was asked if she experienced something similar in that game. She said not as often, but it still happens, it is a matter of luck who you encounter when you are in the game. Many of the other participants were asked if they encountered harassment themselves, having experienced something similar. Not all have been projected to this kind of harassment, but all had witnessed this kind of harassment towards someone else.

With the limited number of interviews conducted, it is insufficient to determine how gender and the stereotypes are experienced within the online gaming community of World of Warcraft for the whole of the study population. However, we can determine that these gender

stereotypes often come with negative connotations and harmful mentalities about that gender stereotype. Causing players to experience harassment, to want to avoid partaking in the community, and having a negative view on certain stereotypes. It was interesting to have been part of different people's experiences and have various participants share such intimate experiences of them being part of a gaming community. There are some forms of hyper femininity and hyper masculinity present in the portrayal of genders in World of Warcraft that are based on Western values, norms, and characteristics which aligns with the theory of cultural imperialism.

6.5. Validity and Reliability of Data

It is complicated to draw conclusions on such big topics with only 20 interviews conducted, as the number of players online within World of Warcraft is so high. Only 20 interviews will not give an accurate overview of the actual experiences and challenges people face surrounding gender identity, regardless of that, the interviews did contribute to various intriguing insights within the literature and theories of gender and globalization, however few insights, another researcher may find it valuable for their further analysis. The research data results have assisted in creating a specific narrative on in-depth personal experiences of gamers online to contribute to the current research field within gender studies. As there are many aspects and elements that can potentially affect someone's experiences surrounding gender, it is important to remember that this research is conducted and analyzed from a subjective and personal point of view from the participants. Therefore, it will not represent all the study population within the community of World of Warcraft.

The reliability of the data decreases slightly due to the Hawthorne effect, which refers to the potential change of people's behavior or responses when they are aware that they are being observed or researched. Participants might end up altering the narrative of their answers to their presumptions about what the researcher wants to hear, which could inaccurately represent their in-game experiences. This Hawthorne effect can alter research findings and make it harder to analyze data because participants may feel under pressure to meet expectations or provide a positive image of themselves or the topic, and especially as gender is such a sensitive topic in current day and age it was presumed that this effect may have occurred with some of the participants.

7. Conclusions

The research conducted on the experiences and challenges surrounding the topic of gender in online gaming communities highlighted a few different kinds of stereotypes such as incels, gamer girls, and simps. The initial ideal goal of the research was to identify how gamers experienced gender identity and to shed light on masculinity and femininity and how this was experienced by the gamers online. In the ideal case scenario, the male participants would have responded similar, and the female participants would have responded similar. However, after conducting the 20 interviews it was clear that the individual experiences of the gamers varied greatly, and answers varied a lot which is extremely intriguing yet needed more time to be analyzed. Thus, the master's thesis took significantly longer to write to allow for the analysis of various themes and linking relevant theories to the topic of gender. This thesis slightly shifted direction to allow for the most recurring topic to be addressed, which was online harassment. To find a relevant theory to attempt to explain the occurrences of online harassment the way they were explained by participants, cultural imperialism was used which assumes that dominant cultures, commonly Western cultures, tend to influence other culture's ideology, values, and ideas to the degree where a culture could completely assimilate the dominant culture. To a sense, this could be applied to gaming communities as well, where we spoke about media messages and digital communication having the power nowadays to influence the way people think and perceive certain things. For gaming communities, the space and gaming environment is constructed by the gaming developers, and for years, the gaming industry was male dominated. Thus, imposing potential negative gender norms onto its players, however as this research was on such a small scale, we cannot conclude that this is the case per se in World of Warcraft. The game was developed in Western society 20 years ago, and for long has always had male protagonists and skimpy dressed damsels in distress that needed saving. However, communities are not constant, they change, norms and values change, the players change, thus we cannot conclude that the current state of the game imposes negative gender norms onto its players. This would require a larger research scope.

Something that we can conclude on with certainty is the apparent and tangible gender stereotypes that are present in the online community of World of Warcraft and that there are forms of hyper femininity and hyper masculinity within the game's portrayal of gender by the developers and that it may be additionally complicated for individuals to make sense of their self-identity when they are continuously exposed to an online environment where they cannot portray their physical selves. The participants found it difficult to describe gender, which was an unexpected finding as well, but may also be due to the limitation of the Hawthorne effect,

with participants finding it harder to identify what it “means to be a woman”. Another conclusion that can be drawn from this research is that a lot of people that engage in online activities experience online harassment and most of the participants that raised this topic have either been harassed online or witnessed someone else being harassed online. When prompting participants on the topic, the female participants seemed to find it a sensitive topic wanting reassurance of confidentiality. As it is hard to monitor digital communication platforms, and the severity these harassment cases could go to, even to extends of stalking and death threats it was alarming to hear about the number of harassment cases the participants experienced. Especially knowing that the study population was between the age of 18 – 34, meaning that adults and young adults alike experienced harassment in digital environments such as World of Warcraft. Many of the participants mentioned that World of Warcraft on European servers, as a community, is not the most toxic community out there compared to some other game environment where harassment is even more prone such as League of Legends which is considered the most toxic gaming community of all time, where players could encounter harassment almost daily.

It would be interesting to conduct further research on different age groups as well, seeing how gaming community norms, values and characteristics could affect younger youth but also older generations. Additionally, to conduct more interviews with the study population in different communities could be enriching, many of the participants considered themselves part of other gaming communities as well and some would link their experiences in World of Warcraft into other gaming communities as well. Thus, as a comparative study of various gaming communities, it could be interesting to further look into the effects of toxic gaming communities on its players and their mentalities. All-in-all, this thesis may contribute to the field of gender studies with small contributions and insights, however further research does need to be conducted to draw larger conclusions on how the concept of gender and its challenges is experienced among male and female gamers in the gaming community of World of Warcraft and similar communities.

7.1. Limitations of the research

This research thesis and the approaches from this research did have limitations when it comes to gathering data and required additional literature resources to attempt to draw a conclusion to answer the research questions. The semi-structured interview did not reach all the players within the game as simply there would not be enough time to conduct research within the given

time span to complete this thesis. However, if more than 20 individuals were interviewed, it would contribute to a more accurate overview of the challenges and experiences surrounding gender in online gaming communities.

The lack of direction could have been a limitation as well for this research approach. There was a slight diversity in answers when analyzing some of the open-ended research questions with some responders being unable to answer certain questions which may be due to the Hawthorne effect. With clearer question phrasing and allowing participants to feel in a confidential space, this diversity could have been minimized. Some of the questions were also phrased in a leading way, meaning that some participants may have answered more towards a certain answer due to the questions posed which could also have reinforced the Hawthorne effect. Some of the open-ended questions did not gather the in-depth qualitative data that was desired as participants would answer the questions in ways that were not calculated for regarding the research topic, requiring additional qualitative data to be gathered through literature available online. The research did end up reaching 20 participant which was its initial predetermined goal, however not within the original allotted time of the research period. Reaching out to additional participants allowed certain themes to re-occur more often and thus also slightly changing the direction of this thesis. Initially, the thesis was aiming to focus on gender identity, and got slightly rephrased towards the experiences and challenges surrounding the concept of gender to allow the theory of cultural imperialism to be introduced and shift focus more on online harassment and gender inequality in online gaming communities.

A general concern when researching communities is that the findings may not apply to other communities within the same space. The characteristics, behaviors, and dynamics observed within a particular community might not be representative of all gaming environments. Thus, generalizing the findings beyond the researched community is challenging and would need to be placed into perspective with other communities as well. Online communities are dynamic entities that are constantly changing which means that characteristics, norms, and behaviors within a community can and will change over time as theories change over time. Therefore, research conducted within a particular period may not capture the full spectrum of experiences or reflect the ongoing state of the gaming community. Continuous engagement with the community can help mitigate this limitation and thus it is encouraged to continue conducting research on the topic of gender in online gaming communities.

The positionality of the researcher was also a limitation for this research as the researcher identifies as female. The researcher may have biases, the participants may answer

differently because of the researcher's gender, and the researcher may have analyzed the results from a biased perspective. As the researcher is part of the community as well, it adds additional biases to the research which will bring along a margin of error and makes the research less reliable for future research purposes. For future references, it would be interesting to conduct this research with a colleague that is familiar with social geography yet unfamiliar with the constructs of online gaming communities.

7.2. Suggestions for future research

If conducting the same research, it is advised to conduct additional semi-structured interviews to gather more information and an additional quantitative survey could benefit the results as well. It is also advised to have a survey run for a longer period than the research span of this research and try and engage more gamers to fill in the survey and partake in the semi-structured interviews, to do this, one could approach more gamers directly more often within the environment of World of Warcraft and checking out different regions within the game. Gathering data from different gaming communities was initially a research approach, however due to the lack of resources, the researcher was unable to gather sufficient and appropriate data from this research approach. For future purposes, it would be interesting to see how other gaming communities perceive gender identity. This could allow for a more accurate overview of the importance of the literature elements that were listed in this research. Furthermore, it is advised to keep a flexible perspective on your research approaches and keep an open mind when collecting data, allowing various themes to emerge from participants' answers.

Focusing on different globalization theories could be interesting, such as network theory, or focusing more on digital communication and how communities are shaped within this digital environment. This thesis did not focus much on how gaming communities are created, more on already created gaming communities and the values and norms within an existing gaming community. It would be interesting to see how values and norms are shaped with an entirely newly created gaming community and give it predisposed norms and values, where the researcher sets the conditions for the gaming environment. To see how values and norms are created in a digital space from scratch, and to see if the digital environment impacts these experiences. This would naturally, take a lot of time, and the writer of this document does not have the tools and capacities to create such a research scope.

This master thesis aimed to deeply dive into the topic gender and how gender, and the challenges surrounding gender, is experienced in online gaming communities but it only barely

scratched the surface of this topic. Gaming has for long been a male-dominated environment, but many women play games as well so they should not be a minority group in this activity. Unfortunately, they are still often perceived as a minority, experience a lot of forms of harassment, and especially when it comes to the game developers as there are fewer female developers as there are men developers. It is still a male dominated industry; however, it is seeing a shift with how women are being portrayed in online gaming and there are more female gaming developers as of 2023 as ever before.

Despite this shift, personal experience also shows that there is still a vivid stereotype of women online, however it is now recently starting to show that males are also being stereotyped as “sims” nowadays. This is also an interesting shift that would be rewarding to further research as well and to identify what it may mean for future stereotypes and gaming trends. There is an avid division between the female and male genders online, however very little has been written about the other genders and how they are perceived. Linking the 5th sustainable development goal to also address online spaces and digital communication could prove to be a useful tool to address gender equality and if researchers were to focus more on online communities some may come up with innovative tools to address gender equality. This is an opinion from the writer after having concluded this master’s thesis.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Guide

Research Project Interview

“Gender Identity Experienced by Male and Female Gamers in World of Warcraft”

This research is conducted to further explore the experience of gender identity and specifically within an online gaming community. There is plenty of academic research within the field of gender studies, especially in live communities within the physical world. For this research, we will explore gender studies within the digital world. World of Warcraft is a massive multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) that has been around for 18 years as of 2022. It is, to date, still the most popular MMORPG that is on the market, hence the reason this game was picked for this specific research. This research project is conducted for a master’s thesis in Sustainable Development and Globalization and will specifically focus on the globalization part of the masters.

The interview will not be handed over to the participant and the participant will receive an information letter prior to the start of the interview to confirm consent and participation in the research.

General Questions

1. How old are you?
2. What gender would you identify yourself as?
3. For how long have you been gaming?
4. For how long have you been playing World of Warcraft?
5. What other games do you play?
6. How many hours a day would you approximately spend on gaming daily?

General Gender Questions

1. What do you think of the concept of gender in current day society?
2. What do you think does it mean to be a man?
 - a. Think of values, principles, ways of acting, behavior, etc.
3. What do you think it means to be a woman?
 - a. Think of values, principles, ways of acting, behavior, etc.

Specific Gaming Questions

1. What kind of gender stereotypes are you aware of in online games?
 - a. Have you encountered these stereotypes online?
 - b. How have your encounters been with these stereotypes?
 - i. Were your assumptions confirmed?
 - ii. How do they confirm the stereotype?
 - iii. How do they act?
 - iv. Why do you think they act the way they do?
 - c. How do these stereotypes translate to the physical world outside of gaming?
 - d. Have these stereotypes affected your views in any way?
2. How is masculinity expressed in World of Warcraft?
 - a. How are male characters displayed in cinematics?
 - b. How are the male non playable characters (NPCs) displayed?
3. How is femininity expressed in World of Warcraft?
 - a. How are female characters displayed in cinematics?
 - b. How are the female non playable characters (NPCs) displayed?
4. Do you feel like there is a difference in being a man/woman online compared to real life? If so, how?
5. Do you feel like you must alter the way you express yourself to others depending on another person's gender?
6. Have you ever had or seen negative experiences surrounding any gender in World of Warcraft?

Appendix 2: Information Letter for Participants

Are you interested in taking part in the research project.

” Gender Identity Experienced by Male and Female Gamers in World of Warcraft”?

This is an inquiry about participation in a research project where the main purpose is to identify how gender identity is experienced by male and female gamers in online gaming communities such as World of Warcraft. In this letter we will give you information about the purpose of the project and what your participation will involve.

Purpose of the project

This research is conducted to further explore the experience of gender identity and specifically within an online gaming community. There is plenty of academic research within the field of gender studies, especially in live communities within the physical world. For this research, we will explore gender studies within the digital world. World of Warcraft is a massive multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) that has been around for 18 years as of 2022. It is, to date, still the most popular MMORPG that is on the market, hence the reason this game was picked for this specific research. This research project is conducted for a master’s thesis in Sustainable Development and Globalization and will specifically focus on the globalization part of the masters.

The research questions that are aimed to be answered are posed below.

- How is gender experienced by men in online communities in the age group of 18 - 34?
 - What does masculinity mean to men in online communities?
 - What does femininity mean to men in online communities?
- How is gender experienced by women in online communities in the age group of 18 - 34?
 - What does masculinity mean to women in online communities?
 - What does femininity mean to women in online communities?
- What gender identities are constructed within the digital environment?
- How is masculinity and femininity represented in games such as World of Warcraft by the digital environment of the game?

Who is responsible for the research project?

The Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) is the institution responsible for the project.

Why are you being asked to participate?

For this research, we want to interview female and male gamers that play or have played World of Warcraft between the age of 18 – 34. We are wanting to have in-depth semi-structured interviews with 15 female gamers and 15 male gamers within this age group to generate insights on this topic. As you have been approached online by the researcher, you are therefore requested to be one of the participants in this research.

What does participation involve for you?

If you choose to take part in this project, it will involve a 1-to-1 interview over Teams with the researcher which will be sound recorded. You do not require to go on camera and do not need to disclose any private information. The interview will be a semi-structured interview allowing you to answer the questions based on your opinion and your views. The recording will only be used for data analysis and will be deleted after the research period is over in June. The duration of the interview will most likely be between 20 – 45 minutes depending on the additional questions that may be asked or the depth of the answers.

Participation is voluntary

Participation in the project is voluntary. If you choose to participate, you can withdraw your consent at any time without giving a reason. All information about you will then be made anonymous. There will be no negative consequences for you if you choose not to participate or later decide to withdraw.

Your personal privacy – how we will store and use your personal data

We will only use your personal data for the purpose(s) specified in this information letter. We will process your personal data confidentially and in accordance with data protection legislation (the General Data Protection Regulation and Personal Data Act). Only the researcher and her supervisor will have access to the data and the interview will be stored on the cloud services of the institution NTNU where I will have a research server which is encrypted. Your name and other personal data that could reveal your identity will not be asked for or used during this research project. With the publication of the thesis, you will remain anonymous as well as no personal data will be used for the writing of this thesis.

What will happen to your personal data at the end of the research project?

The project is scheduled to end 15.05.2022 and after this period the data will be deleted from the research server.

Your rights

So long as you can be identified in the collected data, you have the right to:

- access the personal data that is being processed about you
- request that your personal data is deleted
- request that incorrect personal data about you is corrected/rectified
- receive a copy of your personal data (data portability), and
- send a complaint to the Data Protection Officer or The Norwegian Data Protection Authority regarding the processing of your personal data

What gives us the right to process your personal data?

We will process your personal data based on your consent.

Based on an agreement with NTNU, NSD – The Norwegian Centre for Research Data AS has assessed that the processing of personal data in this project is in accordance with data protection legislation.

Where can I find out more?

If you have questions about the project, or want to exercise your rights, contact:

- NTNU via Ståle Angen Rye, by email: (stale.angen.rye@ntnu.no) or by telephone: +47 73591818.
- Our Data Protection Officer: Thomas Helgesen, by email: (thomas.helgesen@ntnu.no) or by telephone: +47 93079038
- NSD – The Norwegian Centre for Research Data AS, by email: (personverntjenester@nsd.no) or by telephone: +47 55 58 21 17.

Yours sincerely,

Project Leader
Ståle Angen Rye

Student
Jalaisa Dhelaila Dijkink

Consent form

I have received and understood information about the project “Gender Identity Experienced by Male and Female Gamers in World of Warcraft” and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I give consent:

- to participate in a semi-structured interview over Teams.

I give consent for my personal data to be processed until the end date of the project, approx. 15.05.2022.

(Signed by participant, date)