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Tracing female gamer identity. An empirical study into gender and stereotype threat perceptions

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ABSTRACT

It seems that women stand outside game culture resulting in a low gamer identity profile. A nuanced and detailed examination of how gender identity and threatening experiences tap into their play practices has hitherto been lacking however. The present study fills this gap by examining how female players express a gamer identity and how this relates to perceptions of threat and stigmatization. Based on a large-scale survey directed at female players, a statistical model is specified taking into account how respondents attribute a gamer label to their self-concept. Results suggest that the cognitive, evaluative, and affective dimensions of female identity predict gamer identification in distinct ways. Whereas the mere cognitive process of categorizing as a woman is not related to gamer identity, women who feel closely connected to other women are less inclined to self-identify as gamer. However, group appraisal of womanhood is positively related to identifying as a gamer. When taking into account stigmatization, experienced discrimination by male players seems to discourage women to label themselves as gamer.

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1. Introduction

Digital games have a long history of being constructed as a male medium (Fron, Fullerton, Morie, & Pearce, 2007). This has led to the cultural belief that gamer identity is intrinsically tied to masculinity creating a relatively intimidating environment for players who do not meet this criterion (Scharkow, Festl, Vogelgesang, & Quandt, 2015). The recent gamergate controversy[1], a harassment campaign using the Twitter hashtag #GamerGate, is a clear example of a conservative game culture trying to reestablish a male-dominated gamer identity through the exclusion of non-traditional players. The increasing presence of female players and feminist critics is in particular met with resistance pushing femininity outside digital gaming (O'Rourke, 2014). Accordingly, it is likely that such threatening and stigmatizing experiences are causing female players to reject labeling themselves as gamers (e.g.,

Cote, 2015; Taylor, 2008). This disavowal of a gamer identity can have serious implications as digital games are important tools in attaining computer literacy and thus in pursuing a potential career in high-tech computer based industries (Cooper, 2006).

However, to our knowledge, no study has empirically investigated why women do or do not attribute a gamer identity to their selves and how this relates to their experiences with threat and stigma. The present study aims to fill this gap by focusing on two potential important mechanisms underlying women's gamer identification. Firstly, attention is given to how women's gamer identity is intertwined with their gender identity. In doing so, female players' gender is not approached as a binary construct referring to either being man or woman (i.e., sex), but is defined as a multidimensional construct based on a social identity perspective (Cameron, 2004; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This multidimensionality consists of cognitive, evaluative, and affective components of

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[1] The gamergate phenomenon occurred in the summer of 2014. Zoë Quinn, a US game developer, was falsely accused for trading sex with a game journalist in exchange for positive reviews of her game *Depression Quest*. A movement with the hashtag #gamergate perpetuated the attack on Quinn claiming that there is corruption in digital game journalism and that feminists are conspiring against the game industry. One clear goal of this online hate campaign was 'to take back' digital games from the army of feminist social justice warriors. Prominent women in digital gaming, such as game critic Anita Sarkeesian, game developer Brianna Wu, and assistant professor game studies Adrienne Shaw, were severely harassed (Chess & Shaw, 2015).

womanhood, allowing us to inquire into their distinct effects on gamer identity. Secondly, perception of stereotype threat and stigma consciousness are taken into account as essential determinants of women's gamer identity. Although previous studies have indicated that threatening situations can affect skill perception, well-being (Vermeulen, Núñez Castellar & Van Looy, 2014) and performance (Vermeulen and Van Looy, 2016) of female players, little is known about how this affects women's inclination to identify as a gamer. Moreover, most empirical studies approach threat in experimental settings with domain identity (i.e., identification with the studied domain) as a moderating or control variable (Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002). This large-scale survey study, however, explores the relative importance of threat perception and gender identity as determinants for gamer identification[2] with an exclusive focus on female playing audiences.

1.1. The relation between female and gamer identities

1.1.1. 'Being' female and gamer

To better understand women's low identity profile as a gamer, it is important to perceive both gamer and gender identities as social constructs, implying that they result from sociocultural processes (Moghaddas, Persson, Hvidt, Christensen, & Hansen, 2012). Identities are rooted in culture and everyday interaction (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Over time, the repeated performing of identities reinforces cultural meanings and eventually leads to the perception that one's identity is 'natural' *as if* it existed prior to culture (West & Fenstermaker, 1995). In the case of gamer and gender identities, this means that they become so incorporated through repetition that an individual will feel she 'is' a woman and/or gamer instead of acknowledging the underlying social and cultural practices (Brickell, 2006). Important is that these practices draw deeply upon cultural coding and modalities of power suggesting what is appropriate for members (Hall, 1996). In this rationale, it is argued that gamer identity is intrinsically connected to gender in that masculinity, together with whiteness and heterosexuality, is seen as characterizing for being (or, rather: 'doing') a gamer (Fox & Tang, 2014). Several social practices are held accountable for the construction of gamer identity as "naturally" masculine (Consalvo, 2012). The gaming industry played an important part in this process by creating, marketing and thus reproducing its products in light of a predominantly male audience (Shaw, 2013). According to Schut (2006), games remain fertile symbolic resources for men to construct gendered identities indicating that the discourse surrounding digital game culture is stereotypically masculine. Indeed, until today, men are much more likely to identify themselves as gamer than women (Duggan, 2015).

This male supremacy in digital game culture makes it difficult for women who are interested in games to simultaneously integrate their membership as both woman *and* gamer into their self-concept. Although each of us have multiple identities, it seems that the identity structure of female players is little overlapping forcing them to negotiate complex subject positions (Roccas & Brewer, 2002; Yates & Littleton, 2001). Yet, few studies have empirically investigated how exactly women's gender identity is associated with their gamer identity. Additionally, the majority of quantitative studies uses sex solely as a demographical variable in order to denote general differences between male and female

players (e.g., De Grove, Courtois & Van Looy, 2015; Neys, Jansz, & Tan, 2014; Williams, Consalvo, Caplan, & Yee, 2009). This study focuses exclusively on female players deploying a quantitative approach which is particularly suited for assessing the endorsement of gender norms within and between social groups such as game players (Luyt, 2015). In doing so, female identity is considered a multidimensional construct based on a social identity perspective.

1.1.2. A multidimensional approach to female identity

To empirically investigate the relationship between gamer and female identity, we draw on a social identity approach. This perspective on group behavior comprises two different, yet related, theoretical developments: social identity theory (e.g., Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and self-categorization theory (Turner, 1985), which is an extension of the former. Whereas the activation of a social identity is highly context-dependent, both gamer and female identities can be considered as relatively stable categories stemming from predefined cultural beliefs (Tropp & Wright, 2001). This is similar to the idea that gamer and gender identities are social constructs based on the reproduction of dominant principles in situated interaction. Similarly to social constructs, the social identity perspective talks about prototypes referring to the defining attributes or practices of a certain social category (De Grove et al., 2015; Hornsey, 2008). For digital gamers, it has been argued that gaming technology is strongly tied to (but evidently not limited to) masculinity (Carr, 2005), making gender a prototypical attribute for assuming gamer identity. When someone is seen as 'non-prototypical', such as female players, the positive distinctiveness and homogeneity of 'being a gamer' could become threatened. On the other hand, highly prototypical group members will contribute to in-group favoritism (Schmitt & Branscombe, 2001). Prototypicality, thus, helps to see both themselves and others in distinct ways and to form positive feelings about oneself as a result of this social comparison (Abdelal, Herrera, Johnston, & McDermott, 2009; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This denotes that identification with a social identity does not solely rely on a categorization of oneself in the in- or out-group but also entails affective components.

In defining social identities, it is imperative to differentiate between their cognitive and affective dimensions. Tajfel's (1978) original description of a social category seems to pinpoint this division as it states that a social identity is 'that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his *knowledge* of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the *value* and *emotional significance* attached to that membership' (p. 63). The definition provides a theoretical basis for the multidimensionality of social identities consisting of a cognitive component (i.e., *knowledge*) and two affective facets which are related to an evaluative (i.e., *value*) and emotional dimension (i.e., *emotional significance*) (Cameron, 2004). Many empirical studies have supported this tripartite structure of social identities; however, variously termed and slightly differing in their interpretation of the three components (Cameron, 2004; Ellemers, Kortekaas, & Ouwerkerk, 1999; Jackson, 2002; Obst & White, 2005). Given our study's focus on relatively stable gamer and gender identities, we particularly draw on Cameron's (2004) three-factor model in which chronic accessibility is acknowledged of real life groups including large social categories such as gender.

The cognitive component (i.e., *cognitive centrality*) in Cameron's model (2004) refers to a structural prominence of a social identity in an individual's self-concept. It is the ability to categorize oneself into a social group together with the extent to which one is aware that one belongs to that certain group. Typical of cognitive centrality is that it does not necessarily mean that people feel committed to that group or act in accordance with group

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[2] Although identity, identification, or group membership can denote very different things depending on the epistemological paradigm, the present study uses these terms interchangeably for indicating the degree to which the in-group is included in the self and the significance attached to that membership (Tajfel, 1978; Tropp & Wright, 2001).