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1. Introduction

1.1 Rationale and background

Gender as a social construct permeates every aspect of the human experience, including online spaces and all technology. The video game industry is not immune to this influence, as evidenced by the gendered marketing strategies used to sell game consoles and accessories. The Gameboy, for example, has a gendered label and was marketed as a boy's toy in its early commercials, reinforcing traditional gender norms and, to some degrees, limiting its appeal to girls. In addition to gendered marketing, the gender binary also influences the design and selection of avatars in video games: players typically have a choice between male and female characters, leaving non-binary and genderqueer players with little to no choice. This could perpetuate a culture of hetero-sexism and misogyny, but also promote the idea that there are only two distinct and mutually exclusive genders.

In the continuously expanding universe of online gaming, player interaction has extended beyond merely competing or collaborating in the game. Participants establish identities, form relationships, and engage in social discourse, essentially creating a community within a virtual environment. Through the prism of Marshall McLuhan's *global village* concept, this phenomenon appears as an embodiment of his conceptions (McLuhan, 2003). Following his theory, this setting would promote rapid and broad information sharing, fostering a sense of unity among otherwise diverse individuals. In a similar sense, online gaming platforms, through their capacity for real-time, cross-border interaction, emulate this *global village*. These virtual environments transcend geographical and cultural barriers, creating a common virtual space where diverse players cohabit, converse, and co-create.

When given only a choice between male and female, players are often expected to conform to the predetermined gender roles and stereotypes associated with their chosen gender. Male avatars are often designed to be muscular and aggressive, while female avatars are often sexualized and objectified (DeWester et al., 2009). This difference directly results from socialization into segregated roles, a phenomenon that derives from the *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1984) of gender and creates restrictive interpretations that can limit access and opportunities for authentic self-expression and development. Studies have shown that alternative avatar customization options can help combat harmful stereotypes and promote more positive and inclusive representations. In addition to the impact on individuals' sense of self and identity, limited avatar customization options can have broader social implications. A study by Lewis et al. (2017) found that video game avatars with greater customization options were associated with more empathy toward marginalized groups, suggesting that increased avatar customization options can lead to increased empathy and understanding for diverse identities.

Despite the evolution of this digital ecosystem, it has not been immune to societal biases and prejudices, specifically related to gender norms. While the gaming industry has been making strides toward inclusion and diversity, reports of sexism, discrimination, and harassment persist, especially against players who do not adhere to traditional gender norms. This study is motivated by the need to address these concerns and contribute to the ongoing dialogue on promoting diversity within the gaming community. In particular, it focuses on the experiences of gamers who use non-binary avatars, a segment often unobserved in research. By examining their experiences in comparison to other kinds of avatars, the hope is to highlight the dynamics of gender expression and identity in online gaming. Thus, this research aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse surrounding gendered experiences in online gaming. In particular, it seeks to answer four key questions: How do available avatar customization options shape players' online experiences, specifically in relation to their gender identity? (RQ1), To what extent do users feel that online avatars reflect or reinforce traditional gender roles? (RQ2), How are these gendered dynamics

experienced in interactions with other players? (RQ3) and How do avatars that challenge traditional gender norms impact players, especially concerning online harassment? (RQ4). By exploring these questions, the goal is to fill the lacuna in the existing body of research, which has largely overlooked non-binary and gender non-conforming experiences in the context of online gaming.

Further, this research strives to make a significant contribution by creating solutions for the identified issues. Hence, the key objective is to develop a set of **guidelines** that transcend and queerify binary norms, thereby fostering a diverse environment that embraces the multifaceted expressions of gender within online gaming communities. In essence, this study aims to influence the future design of online avatars in gaming environments, with the goal of being a starting point for reflecting on the pervasiveness of gender-binary norms and creating more equitable and diverse gaming worlds.

1.2 Outline

The thesis is organized as follows. **Chapter 2** discusses the review of the body of scholarly research in relation to Gender Role theory and the intersection with avatars in online gaming. **Chapter 3** presents the methodology of the study. **Chapter 4** illustrates the results and **Chapter 5** discusses the outcomes and presents the final output of guidelines. Finally, **Chapter 6** reflects on limitations and inputs for future research work.

2. Literature review

The emergence of social media platforms and video games has transformed the way people interact and connect online. Unlike traditional face-to-face interactions, where gender is often expressed and assumed through physical attributes, in avatar-mediated experience, everyone can create and personalize their digital representations of themselves. This shift has opened up new opportunities to challenge traditional gender norms and expectations while also altering gender expression and performance in online spaces. In online contexts, individuals have the chance to experiment with gender and express themselves in ways that may not be feasible in the physical world, resulting in a greater understanding of the fluidity and malleability of gender in virtual environments, which challenges traditional gender categories and norms (Yee & Bailenson, 2007). However, some scholars and researchers have expressed concern about avatars possibly reinforcing binary gender roles and expectations. This literature review's aim is to provide a theoretical foundation of existing research and to situate the study within the current discourse on the gender binary and online avatars. The terminology used in this study includes idioms related to virtual spaces and social interactions, as well as gender identity and expression.

General findings. Avatars, serving as expressions of individual identity in the digital world, are often more than mere passive, aesthetic choices. They can actively shape user behavior and represent a player's actual identity, ideal self, or an entirely different persona. The *Proteus Effect*, as described by Yee & Bailenson (2007), illustrates how avatar characteristics can lead to behavioral changes in users within virtual environments and even in subsequent real-life interactions. Avatars provide a platform for individuals to experiment with their identity, allowing for explorations of gender expression without fear of judgment

or harm, potentially fostering real-world confidence and expression. However, the existing literature also highlights the transferability of societal biases into the virtual environment. Such biases are apparent in cases of race-based stereotyping, yet the extent to which gender based stereotyping occurs, particularly concerning non-binary and gender non conforming avatars, necessitates further study. Moreover, avatars have been recognized as beneficial tools for whoever deals with gender dysphoria, providing mental benefits and a sense of escapism. However, the reliance on avatars can also lead to potential issues, such as gaming dependence (See ICD-11 definition of Gaming disorder 6C51), when the virtual world becomes a primary source of comfort.

Gaps in the existing literature. This literature review has shed light on multiple gaps in the current body of research regarding non-binary experiences, especially concerning avatar use and representation in digital and virtual environments. It has been observed that a considerable portion of studies on avatars and identity centers primarily on cisgender individuals or approaches the subject from a binary gender model perspective. This approach bypasses non-binary, agender, and genderqueer identities, leaving a void in understanding how these individuals engage with online avatars and how other players engage with them. Although studies confirm the transfer of real-world stereotypes into the digital world, it remains unclear how this phenomenon pertains to non-binary avatars. Moreover, it's crucial to establish whether players using non-binary avatars are more prone to online harassment due to their avatar's divergence from traditional gender norms. When it comes to avatars as tools for identity exploration and self-expression, much of the existing research focuses on cisgender and binary trans* identities, leaving room to explore how non-binary individuals use avatars to navigate their gender identities. These identified gaps underline the need for future research to incorporate a broader spectrum of gender identities, particularly non-binary identities, in the exploration of avatars and digital self-representation.

2.1 Scope

This literature review aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the study of avatar adoption in digital environments, focusing on the relationship between gender and identity. It will encompass various topics, such as the perception of male and female avatars, the influence of online gender performance, and the potential reinforcement of traditional gender stereotypes in gaming contexts. Furthermore, the review will explore the concept of self-representation through avatars in digital spaces, with particular attention given to the experiences of trans* and non-binary players and their use of avatar creation for gender affirmation and exploration. The investigation will span studies about online avatars and gendered experiences published in English from the early 2000s to 2022. This time frame enables an analysis of the latest research combined with a historical perspective on online avatar studies. Moreover, this review will reference the work of thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, whose theories regarding identity, power, and societal norms are especially pertinent to this topic. The study will also draw on the ideas of prominent feminist and queer theorists. Judith Butler's work on the performativity of gender is of particular relevance in exploring how individuals may perform and construct their gender identities within digital spaces. From Joan W. Scott's scholarship, the research adopted the methodological approach which highlights the importance of understanding gender as a socially constructed category; similarly, Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks' work on the intersection of class, religion, and gender provides valuable insights into the multi-faceted nature of identity representation. Though psychology undeniably offers crucial insights into identity formation and behavior, the specialized nature of psychological concepts extends beyond the intended scope of this review. Likewise, while virtual reality is undoubtedly a significant facet of digital environments, it is a broad and complex subject that requires a distinct, focused examination. By narrowing the scope of the review, the goal is to provide a more comprehensive analysis of the designated subject matter rather than attempting to cover too much ground and potentially sacrificing depth and accuracy.

2.2 Elements of Gender Role Theory

Gender definition and meaning. Gender is the social organization of bodies into different categories of people, it refers to the meanings, values, and characteristics that a given culture associates with a person's biological sex (Blackstone, 2003). It is a multifaceted concept that is socially constructed, rather than solely determined by biological differences. There is ongoing debate and discussion about the definition and meaning of gender, as well as how to address gender inequalities and biases. Though we are all born with a certain kind of body that the dominant culture often refers to as "sex," no one is born as a boy or girl, a woman or a man; rather, we are all assigned to a gender and come to identify - or not - with that gender through a complex process of socialization.

Gender is a useful category of analysis only if it is taken as an invitation to think critically about how the meanings of sexed bodies are produced in relation to one another, and how these meanings are deployed and transformed. (Scott, 2015, p. 105). Scholars such as Judith Butler have argued that a gender is a performative act accomplished through repeated social and cultural practices that reinforce gender norms and expectations. In 1999, she stated that if gender is the cultural meaning that the sexed body assumes, "then a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way" (p. 10). Other scholars, such as Anne Fausto-Sterling, emphasize the biological complexity of gender and the existence of intersex and non-binary individuals who challenge the strict dichotomy of male and female (Fausto-Sterling, 2012). Hence, gender is open to interpretation as observed by how various cultures and generations present this concept. As historian Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks states, when discussing gender identity it is essential to keep two key points in mind: the first is that there is massive variability between and within different groups. Whatever one wants to claim, there will always be a counterexample from the past or from somewhere in the contemporary world. The second is that a substantial portion of the world for the most part has taken on a patriarchal character, with any gender subordinate to the male

(Wiesner-Hanks, 2011). It's crucial to be aware that it's not possible to claim a natural, normal, or "correct" form of performing and experiencing gender, as well as in realizing the colossal impact of patriarchal history on all people.

Gender Identity. Gender identity refers to the personal and subjective perception that each individual feels of whether they fit into a specific gender category or not. For most people, there is a sense of congruence between the category one has been assigned to at birth and socialized into and what one considers oneself to be. However, trans* persons demonstrate that it's possible to form a sense of oneself as not like other members of the gender one has been assigned to at birth or to feel oneself to properly belong to another gender category, or to resist categorization at all (Stryker, 2017, p. 27). How gender identities develop and how they can be so diverse are greatly debated topics that fall into the discourses about nature versus nurture and biological determinism versus social construction. Ultimately, it is crucial to acknowledge that some people experience gender in a different way than the majority, rather than to focus on why this might be the case.

Transgender. The term transgender implies movement away from an assigned, unchosen gender position. In recent years, some people have begun to use the term transgender to refer only to those who identify with a binary gender other than the one assigned to them at birth, and to use different words for people who withstand their birth-assigned gender without necessarily identifying with another one (Stryker, 2017, p. 11). This paper will use *transgender*, as defined by Susan Stryker, to refer to the broadest possible range of gender-variant practices and identities. It will also rely on abbreviated variants such as trans or trans* to convey the intrinsic sense of expansiveness and breadth, considering that contemporary connotations of *transgender* may often be more limited.

The word transgender dates back to the mid-1960s and has held many conflicting meanings at different times; during the 1970s and 1980s, it usually referred to a person who wishfully desired to permanently change their social gender through an alteration in *habitus*

and gender expression, which may have involved taking hormones but usually did not involve surgery. However, when the word entered common usage in the early 1990s, it meant “neither male nor female or both male and female” (Wiesner-Hanks, 2011, p. 5), similar to what is encompassed today by the terms genderqueer, gender-nonconforming, and nonbinary. It is important to note that the experiences and identities of trans* persons are complex and multifaceted, and no single explanation can fully capture the diversity and richness of these experiences. Additionally, as language and social attitudes toward gender evolve, the terminology and understanding of gender identity will continue to grow.

Cisgender. This term first appeared in the twenty-first century and grew popular to refer to those whose gender assigned at birth matches their current self-identified gender. The prefix *cis-* indicates “on the same side”, as opposed to the prefix *trans-*, which means “across.” It is used to mark the typically unstated or assumed privilege of being nontransgender. However, using the term too rigidly can foster another kind of gender binary: *cis* versus *trans*. It aligns *binary* and *cis* with cultural politics of normativity and nonbinary and *trans** with notions of transgression or radicalness (Stryker, 2017, p. 20).

Stryker (2017) further argues that rather than using *cis* and *trans* to identify two entirely distinct kinds of people, it's more productive to ask *how* somebody is *cis* (meaning, how different aspects of their bodies and minds line up on the side of gender divisions in privileged ways) and how they are *trans* (that is, how they cross the boundaries of their birth-assigned gender in ways that can have adverse social consequences) and to recognize that all people, however, they are *cis* or *trans**, are subjected to nonconsensual social gendering practices that privilege some and discriminate against others (p. 21).

Queer. This research will use the word *queer* as defined by Annamarie Jagose (1996), “to refer to those gestures or analytical models which dramatize incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire” (p. 3). While the term has a complex background due to its historical use as a slur, it has been reclaimed

by many in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans* communities in recent decades. It can serve as an umbrella term that includes sexual and gender minorities or as a critical and political identity that challenges normative ideas about sexuality and gender, with the meaning of being “antiheteronormative” (Striker, 2017, p. 27).

This idiom of uncertain origin entered the English vocabulary in the early 16th century, principally as a synonym for strange, odd, peculiar, or eccentric. By the late nineteenth century, it was commonly used to refer to same-sex attracted men. While queer does have a history of being used as demeaning, that has never been its sole meaning: its usage was sometimes employed in neutral and affirming contexts. In the 1960s and 1970s, when sexual and gender minorities fought for civil rights and new ways of being in society, new identities were sought. LGBT+ people began reclaiming the word queer from its former derogatory connotation, thanks to the work of activists like *Queer Nation* that used queerness in this critical sense as part of a more militant, anti-assimilationist political action.

Some people began to identify as *queer* in the critical sense, not as a synonym for a stable gender or sexual identity, but to indicate a non-conforming gender or sexual identity. The word *queer* disarmed homophobes by reversing its derogatory nature: it is a way to subvert dominant cultural narratives and challenge oppressive power structures (McCann & Monaghan, 2019). However, it is crucial to recognize that all individuals of a particular group or society may not embrace the use of such a term, and it can be a source of controversy.

Queer studies. Queer theory and queer studies are an articulation of theoretical considerations and interdisciplinary cultural inquiry concerning the terrain of sexuality studies, and gay and lesbian studies in particular. Developed in the American sphere since the 1990s, the inclusion of the term queer points to a linguistic turn: a focus on sexuality not as an objective reality but, as we have discussed above, rather as a shifting terrain that is constantly redefined by the discourses, representations, and self-representations of specific cultural subjects.

To call oneself queer is to introduce a difference and multiply the narratives, as it acknowledges the diversity within queer communities and challenges the binary sexual categories established by positivist sexual science. This notion aligns with Michel Foucault's concept of the "will to know," which critiques the ways in which knowledge and power are intertwined and how they shape our understanding of sexuality. His major claim is that power is not essentially repressive but productive. It does not operate by repressing and prohibiting the true and authentic expressions of a natural sexuality. Instead it produces, through cultural normative practices and scientific discourses, the ways in which we experience and conceive of our sexuality and gender. Not only is there control exercised via other people's knowledge of individuals such as doctors' knowledge, for example; there is also control via individuals' knowledge of themselves. Individuals internalize the norms laid down by the sciences of sexuality and monitor themselves in an effort to conform to these norms. Thus, they are controlled not only as *objects* of disciplines but also as self-scrutinizing and self-forming *subjects* (Foucault, 1978). Foucault's work on sexuality and power has been influential in the development of queer theory, which seeks to deconstruct and critique normative understandings of gender and sexuality. Queer theory drew on social constructionism to critique the idea that any sexuality or gender identity was normal or natural, highlighting how particular norms of sexuality and gender were historically contingent. Queer constructionism adopts from Foucault the strategy of deconstructing identities taken for granted as natural and viewing them as complex socio-cultural formations instead.

Queer Studies question and explore the construction of homo/hetero binarism as a historical producer of identities, and as a regulating discourse about them. The terms in binary opposition are mutually constructed in unstable ways: each denies the other but depends on it for stabilization; the contiguity of their boundaries belies the clear separability of each term.

Gender binary. The concept of *binary gender* refers to the social construction of gender as a binary system consisting of two distinct and opposing categories: male and female. This binary system has a limited and exclusionary nature that manifests itself in the assumption that a person's biological sex assigned at birth determines their gender identity, ignoring the diversity of gender identities and expressions outside the binary system. In recent years, the limitations of the gender binary have been increasingly recognized and addressed in both academic and popular discourse. Today, gender is understood as a fluid and multi-layered aspect of identity that is socially constructed and represented through various cultural and social practices. As previously mentioned, critiques of the binary concept of gender are based on feminist and queer theories that seek to challenge and dissolve the normative assumptions underlying gender identity and expression.

Habitus and Gender roles. According to Bourdieu, the *habitus* is created by a kind of interplay between free will and structures: dispositions that are both shaped by past events and structures, and that shape current practices and structures and also, importantly, that condition our very perceptions of these (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 170). The idea of gender roles is intertwined with that of *gender habitus*, as they are the socially constructed expectations and behaviors associated with a particular gender. It refers to the way individuals learn to express and act out gender roles and how they are perpetuated by socially-constructed characteristics and behaviors of femininity and masculinity, which are reinforced through family, education, workplace, media, and other public standards (Lehdonvirta et al., 2014). Thus, the *habitus of gender* encompasses both the physical and behavioral characteristics typically associated with masculinity and femininity, as well as the expectations and roles assigned to individuals based on their gender. These gender roles are often deeply ingrained in individuals' habits and behaviors, and they can significantly impact their daily lives, experiences, and social and economic opportunities.

2.3 Digital Avatars and Gender Roles

Virtual space. Online environments, such as the internet and social media, have become increasingly important in various aspects of our lives, including communication and education. Virtual space is a broad term encompassing any non-physical environment created with the aid of software and experienced through a computer or other device. This includes video games, social networking sites, and other digital environments where users can interact with each other and with software-mediated elements. A virtual world is a digital environment that feels real and complete, and is larger than a simple game map (Hall & Novak, 2008, p. 4). It is a space which may be populated by many users who can create a personal avatar, and simultaneously and independently explore the virtual world, participate in its activities and communicate with others. The use of virtual environments has further enhanced the sense of realism in video games, allowing players to experience the game world in a more immersive way.

Avatars and Self. An avatar is a graphical representation of a user or player in a virtual world or online environment. It can take various expressions, such as a graphical illustration, a picture or a character, like on social media, or it can be an electronic image that represents and can be manipulated by a computer user, especially in video games. Essentially, it is a visual representation of oneself and could be customized to represent some aspects or the whole of one's identity or be a completely alternative self.

Several studies have examined how certain behaviors exhibited in the real world are modified and expressed in the virtual world. For example, Bailenson et al., (2003) found that the concept of personal space still applies in virtual worlds and users maintain a proper interpersonal distance between their avatars and others. Indeed, online performance could transform into real-world behavior: Yee and Bailenson's notion of the *Proteus Effect* refers to the phenomenon where people adapt their behavior to the characteristics of their avatars in

virtual environments. These findings suggest that our virtual bodies can change how we interact with others in online communities as well as in subsequent face-to-face interactions. Findings have shown that people infer their expected behaviors and attitudes from observing their avatar's appearance and that the appearance of avatars can lead to behavioral changes in users (Yee & Bailenson, 2007). Other studies have investigated how individuals represent themselves in digital environments through the use of avatars, for instance, recent research in the field of psychology investigated the preferences of self-presentation through avatars compared to actual self-presentation and an idealized self-idea, in several online activity contexts. The results of the study suggest that individuals use avatars in digital environments as a means of expressing their ideal selves, as well as to experiment with different identities and roles. Additionally, the study found that the level of customization in avatar creation is linked to the strength of the psychological attachment between the individual and their avatar. The research concludes that avatar use in digital environments can provide individuals with a sense of control and agency over their online self-presentation, but can also lead to negative consequences such as reduced accountability (Zimmermann et al., 2022).

Interaction with an online avatar can also be a way to explore queerness in a playful manner, an essential aspect of forming a healthy identity that otherwise might be precluded. An example of this paradigm is the case report of a twenty-year-old trans woman, Cynthia, who used her video game avatar as a tool in her therapeutic progress during her medical transition (Rivera, 2022). This study draws on the work of Bonnie Ruberg, who argues that “video games have always been queer... queerness and video games share a common ethos: the longing to imagine alternative ways of being and to make space within structures of power for resistance through play” (2019, p. 1). The central question of the case study analyzes the phenomenology of video games in relation to gender-nonconforming subjects and how therapists can take the best advantage of the potential for video games to provide a site for gender acts that may otherwise be considered taboo. Cynthia feared punishment for her gender exploration, and through therapy, she found solace in playing *The Sims* to

experiment with her gender expression in a safe space. Eventually, she gained the confidence to take these experiments outside the virtual world (Rivera, 2022).

Essentially, the avatar is the link between the player of the game and the virtual world (Friedberg, 2015). It can serve as a digital identity, reflecting the person's preferences or identity and mediating interactions between people. In order to explore the relationship between gender identity, interiorized gender norms, avatar creation, and online experiences, this study asked: (RQ1) How do the available avatar customization options shape players' online experiences, specifically regarding their gender identity?

Gender norms and avatar-mediated experience. Online gender stereotypes have been extensively researched, including their impact on people's behavior. However, not much has included the experiences of non-binary individuals and those who do not fit into traditional gender norms in online environments. In 2009, a study by the University of Nebraska proposed a model to investigate the gender stereotypicality of male and female avatars and their effects on trust perceptions (DeWester et al., 2009). Yet, this research had the structural limit of only relying on binary gender, therefore, the results may not be generalizable to non-binary and trans* individuals. Additionally, the research did not consider the intersectionality of gender with other factors, such as ability, race and ethnicity. Another research conducted by Brown et al. (2021) aimed to better understand the issues of avatars and non-playable character design by investigating gender stereotypes and differences in using avatars in learning contexts, specifically in educational games. Results demonstrated that avatar preferences can be complex and influenced by several factors, including self-similarity, attractiveness, and cultural appropriateness. Nevertheless, the study was limitedly restricted to exploring gender differences and it relied on self-reported data, which may be subject to social desirability bias. Overall, these researches highlight the importance of understanding the impact of stereotypes in both the real and virtual worlds and the need for more intersectional research.

Earlier research led by Yee and Bailenson (2007) focused on the avatar's perceived race: researchers assigned avatars to people and observed their behavior in a virtual world. They examined whether the apparent race of an avatar resulted in different levels of compliance when the avatar asked others for a favor. Results showed that light-skinned avatars were significantly more likely to obtain favors than dark-skinned avatars, suggesting that skin color or race-based stereotyping in the real world also transfers to virtual worlds. Is this also the case for gender-based stereotyping? Are some social dynamics that are performed online dependent on the perceived gender assumed by a player's avatar? And how do these dynamics change when an avatar with non-binary gender characteristics is involved? Could players be subject to hate due to the non-conformity of their avatar of choice? Further research is needed to explore these topics, therefore, this study proposes the following research questions: (RQ2) To what extent do users feel that online avatars reflect or reinforce traditional gender roles and (RQ3) How are these gendered dynamics experienced in interacting with other players?

Avatars and Ideal Self. While the review touches on dysphoria, this research will not delve into the topic in depth because it belongs to the medical field, which is not the focus of this study. Literally, a sense of unhappiness over the incongruence between how one subjectively understands one's experience of gender and how one's gender is perceived by others. *Gender dysphoria* was a common term among medical and psychotherapeutic professionals who worked with transgender populations in the 1960s through the 1980s. Partly in response to transgender activism that contested the pathologization of trans identities, *gender dysphoria* came back into fashion in the twenty-first century as part of an argument for why transgender health care needs should be covered by medical insurance (Striker, 2017, p. 23).

Avatars can be used as a tool for experimenting with and expressing gender identity online by allowing users to alter their digital presence, or try out a different way of being perceived, potentially impacting their behavior both online and in the physical world. The

first study to examine online gaming among those with gender dysphoria was conducted by Griffiths, Arcelus, and Bouman (2016) presenting four case studies about people who attended an assessment at the National Centre for Gender Dysphoria in Nottingham. The findings demonstrate the different ways video gaming may provide mental benefits and a sense of escapism for trans* people. Gaming may therefore be a useful way to express one's experienced gender identity in a safe, non-threatening, non-alienating, non-stigmatizing, and non-critical environment. This appears to mirror the findings of other studies outside of the online gaming environment (Griffiths et al., 2016, p. 64). Keeping in mind the implications of the Proteus Effect, this could develop into a powerful coping skill that might keep individuals from resorting to unhealthy managing behaviors. However, staying within the virtual world can become too much of a secure and safe environment, leading to gaming dependence or addiction. To report this problem, online players have been surveyed about whether they have suffered from a gaming disorder.

Overall, the study suggests that simple design features such as increased customization, collaborative environments, neutral gender patterns, and personalized design strategies could better reflect gender diversity and facilitate the positive gains reported by participants. The study has limitations due to the small number of participants and its inability to represent those with gender dysphoria more generally.

On this topic, a recent research aimed to investigate how trans* youth can use video games to cope with stress and access informal networks of support, when experiencing mental health challenges due to a combination of minority stress and gender dysphoria (McKenna et al., 2022). The study's findings consolidated the notion that video game avatar creation can provide a safe space for gender exploration and affirmation, as it allows individuals to create avatars that reflect their gender identity without fear of being deadnamed or misgendered. Similarly, Morgan et al., (2020) interviewed seventeen young trans* subjects, finding considerable therapeutic benefit in their subjects' use of video game avatars to explore and rehearse their gender identities, often with the intention of eventually manifesting this virtual confidence in the corporeal space. Results highlighted how gaming

can be a positive coping mechanism, stressing the importance of the capacity of the avatar for user representation. However, the study was solely focused on trans* youth, which can be limiting for older trans* people and for cis-people, who can also suffer from body dysphoria. Moreover, participants spoke about negative experiences of using an avatar, specifically feeling excluded from playing games with non-customizable or exclusively binary avatars only and experiencing a lack of connection with the avatar.

Further study examining trans* players of three well-known MMORPGs, has highlighted that many participants embodied their ideal selves through their avatars (Baldwin, 2018). The significance of the findings regards the difference between physical idealism and personality idealism: while users apparently grow more attached to their avatar if its body differs significantly - in an idealized way - from theirs, it looks as if great differences in personality actually reduce satisfaction. This conclusion reinforces the notion that users are crafting an authentic ideal self, as they cannot form a bond with an avatar that behaves drastically different from their true selves.

The more apparent fluidity of online identities and avatar representations suggests that they are closer to the reality of human identity than an offline identity defined by stability. In this context, the avatar serves as a vessel for self-exploration and personal growth. Out of the gamers interviewed, more than two-thirds explicitly stated they have used video game avatars to experiment with their ideal physical presentation, thus engaging in the creation of emergent narratives. Moreover, many people mentioned their extreme dislike of phones or voice chat due to voice dysphoria, the mental distress generated by a voice that causes people to assume their gender is not the one they identify with. Several overall trends emerged: first, the longer it has been since a person has made their trans* identity public and began progress on any medical transition goals, the less likely they were to consciously experiment with gender in video games. Age also seems to be a factor affecting whether or not a person uses avatars to experiment with gender presentation: the younger participants are used to higher levels of customization for almost every product, while the older participants are used to simply choosing a gender and playing with a character who most of

the times couldn't be customized further. Therefore, researchers concluded that they use the avatar to extend their gender identity into the virtual world, but not to visualize specific body changes. Nonbinary gamers expressed a desire to have an avatar system that would allow a user to start with a genderless avatar and add any physical characteristic to that body. It's needed to establish whether players using non-binary avatars are more prone to face online harassment, therefore the study asked: (RQ4) How do avatars that challenge traditional gender norms impact players, specifically in facing online harassment?

2.4 Conclusions

The research reviewed throughout this chapter has illuminated the intricate and multifaceted dynamics surrounding avatar identity and gender expression in online environments. These online representations not only reflect the person's self-perception but can also influence their behavior in the virtual and physical worlds. Gender norms and stereotypes are deeply embedded into these dynamics, and their impact on the formation and perception of avatars remains a significant area of inquiry. Crucial is the need for more comprehensive research into the experiences of non-binary and trans* people, whose interactions with avatars can challenge traditional gender roles and binaries. Additionally, avatars offer an opportunity for users to experiment with their gender identities, potentially providing a safe space for gender exploration and affirmation. For individuals with gender dysphoria, and particularly for trans* individuals, the ability to create an avatar that reflects their gender identity and that prompts other players to use their correct pronouns, is a validating experience. However, the literature review has highlighted a need for more research in this direction, for better understanding non-binary experiences and for ensuring that the design and features of avatars and online environments are respectful, and supportive of all users. Despite the benefits and opportunities presented by avatars in online environments, there are challenges and limitations to be aware of. Social dynamics in online

worlds, the potential for online harassment, the risk of dependence or addiction to gaming, and the lack of customization options that reflect the diversity of gender identities, different body sizes, and skin colors are among the issues that require further examination and address.

In conclusion, avatars can serve as a critical tool for self-exploration, identity construction, and social interaction in the digital age. They can reflect or challenge societal norms, facilitate personal growth, and offer valuable insights into the complexities of human identity. As the intersection of technology, psychology, and social norms continues to evolve, so too will our understanding of avatars and their significance in our increasingly digital lives. There is an urgent need for ongoing research to ensure a future in which online environments are as diverse and respectful as the users they serve.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research questions

The primary focus of this research revolves around understanding the intersection of gender identity exploration and avatar customization in video games, and the subsequent impact these factors have on players' online experiences. In its qualitative capacity, the study seeks to survey and capture the nuanced experiences of players for avatar customization, gender representation, and how they affect online interactions. Quantitatively, the objective is to assess the prevalence of certain attitudes and experiences among the online gaming population. The questions for this study have been formulated to encapsulate an array of perspectives and considerations, which have been reported in [Chapter 2](#). In order to probe the influences that avatar customization exerts on a player's digital self-expression and online interaction, the first question that frames this investigation is: (RQ1) How do the available avatar customization options shape players' online experiences, specifically regarding their representation of gender identity?

Building on this, the study further aims to investigate into the extent to which online avatars reflect or reinforce traditional gender norms, as well as their impact on online player's dynamics. To assess these concepts, the study asked: (RQ2) To what extent do users feel that online avatars reflect or reinforce traditional gender roles and (RQ3) How are these gendered dynamics experienced in interacting with other players?

Lastly, the research seeks to understand the impact of avatars that challenge traditional western societal norms on gender roles, with a great focus on experiences of online harassment. This inquiry examines the digital landscape's response to avatars that deviate from said norms, aiming to provide insights into the broader cultural discourse around identity in the online gaming community. Hence, seeking to understand this impact

on the player experience, this question was formulated: (RQ4) How do avatars that challenge traditional gender norms impact players, specifically in facing online harassment?

To comprehensively investigate these research questions, the study will employ a mixed-method approach and will seek to incorporate diverse players' experiences. The data collected will then be analyzed and visualized, aiming to deliver insightful analysis and discussion, contributing to the growing body of knowledge surrounding gender identity and digital representation in online gaming.

3.2 Research design

Conceptual framework. This study is situated within an interpretivist philosophical perspective, prioritizing the nuanced understanding of social phenomena through the examination of individuals' subjective experiences and the meaning they attribute to them. The interpretivist paradigm, by nature, recognizes the fundamental role of cultural subtleties and contextual variables in shaping human actions and belief systems. Consequently, research design incorporates these elements, taking contextual nuances into its framework. Therefore the research is more inclined to explore subjective experiences and perceptions, rather than objective truths about gender in relation to online avatars. The ultimate objective of the research is to propose **guidelines** for the creation of a more diverse array of online avatars. In terms of theoretical foundations, the study draws extensively from feminist and queer theory, both of which consider gender as a social construction and aim to enhance narratives and voices that are commonly marginalized or excluded. In line with these theories, the methodology is predominantly inductive. The research begins by collecting data, from which patterns and relationships are analyzed in order to construct theories and explanations. This allows for an in depth understanding of the underlying factors and mechanisms.

Research strategy. The strategy employed in this research integrates a mixed-method approach, combining a survey for quantitative data collection and interviews for qualitative insights used to explain and contextualize quantitative findings (Ishtiaq, 2019). This coupling of methods gives depth and dimension to the data and enriches the findings, allowing for a textured understanding of the human narratives that underlie the statistics. Specifically, the study adopts a convergent parallel mixed methods design as described by Creswell (2014, p. 15), that merges quantitative and qualitative data in order to provide a comprehensive analysis of the research problem. Both forms of data are collected at roughly the same time and then the information is integrated in the interpretation of the overall results. The cross-sectional time horizon of the data ensures a precise temporal focus. The survey and interviews capture a specific moment in time, thereby offering a snapshot of the current status of gender representation in online avatars and user experiences, setting a benchmark for future research. The survey, extensively reported in the [Appendix](#), was designed on Typeform, an online survey platform. Following its creation, the survey was then integrated into a website constructed using the web editor Brackets, employing markup language and the hosting was carried out on WordPress at *beyondbinary.altervista.org*, shown in Appendix at [Figure 15](#). A similar color palette was selected for both the website and the survey, creating visual consistency for an intuitive association between the survey and the broader research project. Importantly, the design principles implemented here also consider accessibility and usability (Nielsen, 1994, p. 26). The chosen color scheme is color-blind friendly and the website is layout responsive.

3.3 Participants and ethics

Sampling. The identified population of this study represents a broad spectrum of gender identities, with almost equal representation for male, female, and non-binary respondents. While it may not perfectly mirror the demographics of the broader population

of online game players, it offers a balanced mix of perspectives across different gender identities, enhancing the ability to draw different conclusions and allowing to focus on experiences that are most often excluded from the dominant narrative. Given the nature of the research questions and the digital context of online gaming, an internet-based, probability sampling approach suited the study.

Respondents were also recruited by utilizing platforms like Nextdoor.com, social media, and Reddit, to gather insights from a diverse range of people in different locations and cultures. To maximize this effect, respondents were encouraged to share the survey with their connections, using a snowball sampling technique. This helps reach even more individuals and further amplify the data. Nevertheless, it's crucial to recognize the potential for bias in these approaches, especially with snowball sampling, as it may lead to an overrepresentation of certain social networks. To overcome this limitation, the researcher strived to have initial participants representing a broad spectrum of backgrounds, and utilized multiple outreach platforms to ensure diversity in the data collection process.

Ethics. Ethical principles are incorporated at the core of the study: every person participating, either in the survey or interviews, must give their informed consent. This is achieved by ensuring that respondents fully understand the purpose and procedures of the study before they agree to take part. The privacy and confidentiality of the participants' data are strictly maintained: personal identifiers are removed automatically by Typeform, the survey platform, and any data collected is stored securely and exclusively used for this study.

The demographic questions were phrased in inclusive language that respects all differences; in addition, following ethical principles, participants were given the option to opt out of the most sensitive questions (*HCI Gender Guidelines*, Scheuerman, n.d.). These measures align with ethical guidelines and help to build trust between the research and its subjects. As for the survey and interview questions, they've been identified after thorough analysis of the literature and in regard to the study's goals and objectives, always respecting the intersectionality of the research.

3.4 Data collection

The study's primary sources of data are derived from a survey, additionally, selected survey respondents were interviewed to further supplement the findings. The choice for such stimuli is rooted in their ability to generate rich, multifaceted data that can shed light on diverse user experiences, perceptions, and behaviors in the online gaming sphere.

Survey stimulus. The first set of survey questions is designed to provide a detailed picture of the respondents' identities, laying a comprehensive foundation for the subsequent exploration of avatar usage and online experiences. Age can help uncover potential generational nuances in avatar usage and online experiences, while the continent of provenance is crucial in understanding cultural influences on attitudes toward gender. Acknowledging the layers of intersectionality that can significantly shape an individual's navigation of the digital landscape, the survey inquired about aspects of ethnicity and disability. While maintaining adherence to ethical guidelines, allowing respondents the option to opt out from disclosing this information to the researchers (*HCI Gender Guidelines*, Scheuerman, n.d.). Given the intricate weave of sexual orientation and gender identity into online behaviors and perceptions of avatars, these details are pivotal to accurately answering our research questions. Thus, the survey consciously avoids offering a non-disclosure option for these fields. Nevertheless, to align with ethical principles, the gender identity question is left open-ended, accommodating a diverse array of gender identities. Trans* respondents are given particular attention due to their unique experiences in exploring gender identity via avatars. If a respondent identifies as non-cisgender, an additional set of inquiries is unlocked, opening up deeper layers of discussion. This next layer of questions allows for a closer examination of trans* individuals' experiences with avatars as potential spaces for gender exploration before coming out. The survey probes whether someone has ever felt excluded or unwelcome in an online platform due to their

gender identity or avatar representation, it also delves into the comfortability of these individuals in connecting with others online as compared to real-life interactions. It also tackles the issue of transphobic behavior in the gaming industry and whether this influences individuals' decisions to support certain video games. Online harassment specifically aimed at a person's gender orientation is another crucial topic the survey examines, given its potential impact on the respondents' online experiences and general mental well-being. Finally, this section of the survey briefly investigates the prevalence and management of gender dysphoria and whether avatar usage in video games offers momentary relief from these experiences. This layered approach to data collection allows us to paint a context-rich portrait of trans* respondents, which is essential for driving our research toward its goals.

Stepping into the next phase of the survey, users are invited to explore their experiences in the digital landscape of online video games. This section, encompassing approximately twenty closed questions, is the core of the exploration and is the lengthiest of the survey sections. It dives deep into the preferences for avatar customization, perceptions of gender representation in games, and experiences with online harassment and discrimination. Firstly, the survey asked users which genre of online videogames they typically engage with, as different genres often have diverse avatar customization possibilities and varying degrees of gender representation. It will provide an initial understanding of the circumstances in which online interactions happen. As discussed in [Chapter 2](#), the ability to customize an avatar significantly influences personal expression, identity exploration, and embodiment in the digital world. The interest is in whether these options offer a representation that respondents feel aligns with their identity or whether they perceive a disconnect between their true selves and the available choices.

Since the research focuses on identities that don't fit within the binary of male and female, we ask for avatar preferences that may not adhere to a specific gender and the experience of gender-neutral or non-binary representation in games. The use of voice modification tools in multiplayer video games, the frequency and type of eventual harassment faced, and the encounter rate of toxic behaviors are other essential aspects

explored, as well as the potential impact on players' mental health. The research further inquiries is if the often-binary choice of male or female avatars has ever felt limiting, as well as experiences of being mistaken for a different gender based on the player's avatar representation. Perceived differences in how other users treat those who appear female and the unique experiences stemming from such dynamics is also investigated.

By weaving together the responses to these diverse questions, the aim is to map the complex terrain of gender, identity, and experience in online video gaming, helping bring answers to the research questions more effectively. As the survey progresses, it delves into avatar selection and examines the distinct experiences associated with gender representation, specifically female, male, and gender-neutral avatars. The investigation starts by examining the experiences associated with female avatars, focusing on the potential challenges encountered due to limited customization options, such as a scarcity of short hairstyles or the prevalence of similar body types. In contrast, we also explore whether male avatars offer a perceived wider range of customization possibilities. In the following section, the pivot is to investigate male avatars, examining similar issues but through the lens of masculinity. The critical focus is on how the portrayal of masculinity in avatars influences online experiences. The concluding part focuses on gender-neutral avatars, questioning the availability of such options in popular and less-known video games. The researcher wants to inquire how players' experiences vary when using avatars that defy traditional gender norms and if this leads to a change in the amount of online harassment faced. The insights drawn from these sections form an important part of the research, shedding light on the nuanced avatar-gender dynamics within the gaming community. This information is integral to addressing the key research questions and furthering the wider discourse on gender, identity, and their expressions in the digital realm.

Interview stimulus. In line with the intersectionality principle, the interview questions begin surveying demographic information like age, continent of provenance, ethnicity, potential disability status, sexual orientation, and gender identity, leading to

further questions if they identify as non-cisgender. Participants are probed on their experiences with avatar customization in the games they play the most, pressures to choose a certain gender for their avatars, the differential treatment of male and female avatars, and their personal experiences with online harassment. The inquiry extends to participants' experiences with gender-neutral or non-binary avatars. The interview process concludes with an open-ended question that invites participants to envision changes they would like to see in how online avatars represent gender. Data were recorded, then transcribed and later thematically analyzed, for triangulating the other data analyzes in relation to the research questions.

3.5 Analysis procedure

Data normalization. The data normalization procedure has been carried out both on Google Sheets and Tableau Prep, to ensure the most accurate and reliable outcomes. Initially, on Google Sheets, the process began with eliminating the survey's superfluous columns, such as encrypted personal IDs, affirmative responses to privacy statements, start date, submit date, and Network ID. Simultaneously, qualitative fields with textual information were also removed. Subsequently, the columns are renamed for clarity and simplicity, and data cleaning is carried out. For instance, multiple response values are transformed from textual repetition of value to numerical ones. This step also includes the normalization of participant genders. Furthermore, Likert and temporal scales ranging from 5 (strongly agree, always) to 1 (strongly disagree, never) are assigned respective values from 5 to 1. Lastly, the data frame is divided into smaller tables to facilitate subsequent analysis. Transitioning to Tableau Prep, the process involves various stages, including pivot operations, data cleaning and filtering and, ultimately, the production of the output for analysis in Tableau.

Data analysis. The data analysis process employed for this study utilizes a mixed-methods approach, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative analysis to provide a comprehensive exploration of the subject matter. For quantitative data analysis, Tableau was used as the primary tool for carrying out statistical analyses, enabling the calculation of frequencies and percentages, and assessing the popularity of various avatar categories among the gaming community. Measures of variation, such as range and standard deviation, were utilized to underscore the differences in responses across diverse groups of online players. Particularly significant to this research was the deployment of Likert scales, allowing for an in-depth estimation of participants' attitudes and experiences. The inquiry of Likert scale responses presented both a consensus and disagreement analysis where data were treated as ordinal, though with a recognition that results might be influenced by social desirability bias, cultural differences in topic sensitivity, and acquiescence. For the qualitative portion of the research, a thematic analysis was conducted to identify, analyze, and report patterns in the data. This offered insights on player perceptions and interpretations of their experiences in relation to avatar customization and its interplay with gender representation. Central to this analysis were theoretical concepts such as gender expression, stereotypes, and norms, offering depth to the interpretation of results.

Open-ended questions were analyzed to derive qualitative insights, while closed-ended questions, discrete choices and rating scales were used for quantitative analysis. By opting for a combination of quantitative and qualitative data analysis techniques, this study aims to provide a holistic approach to the research questions, to draw a comprehensive picture of the influence of avatar customization on player experiences and the resultant interactions within the online gaming community.

4. Results

4.1 Participant profile

Demographics. The survey collected answers from 147 participants: 60 female, 51 male and 36 non-binary persons, mean age 24.31, Standard Deviation (SD) equal to 7.19. Figure 1 shows detailed age distribution by the gender of participants. Since respondents were asked to report their age range, the mean and SD were calculated using the means of the age range, thus it may have lost accuracy. 62 respondents identify as transgender or another non-cisgender identity. The sample presents a diverse combination of sexual orientations, with 56 people identifying as heterosexual, 15 as asexual, 39 as bisexual and 16 as pansexual. 33 people identify as queer, 13 as lesbian, 12 as demisexual and 5 as gay. When analyzing disability, 117 individuals indicated they do not have one, while 22 responded affirmatively, and 8 preferred not to disclose this information. The sample's geographical distribution was predominantly concentrated in Europe, with 103 respondents residing there, 38 people living in North America, 2 in South America, 3 in Asia and 1 in Australia. In terms of ethnicity, 120 respondents identify as White, 9 as Latinx, 9 as Asian and 3 as Black or Afro-descendant. 3 respondents identified as belonging to more than one ethnic group and 3 respondents preferred not to disclose their ethnicity. The interview panel was composed of 5 selected survey respondents: 2 female, 2 male and 1 non-binary person, mean age 23, Standard Deviation (SD) equal to 1.67. All interviewees were from Europe, but differed in gender identity, sexual orientation and ethnic background.

Gender	Age range							Under 15
	15-18	19-24	25-30	31-35	36-44	45-54	55-64	
Female	7	32	24	2	7	1	2	
Male	9	24	17	1	3	2		
Non-binary	6	29	10	9	2			2

Figure 1. Table of participants' age distribution by gender.

Type of online games. The analysis of the preferred games genres demonstrated a diverse interest. Sandbox games, such as Minecraft and The Sims, were the most popular, with 82 responses. Role-playing games were second in popularity, with 65 responses. Action-adventure games were selected in 63 of the responses, while puzzlers and party games were favored 57 times. Platformer games held 52 responses, while there was fewer preference for shooter games, which accounted for 32 of the responses. Survival and horror games received 29 preferences, closely followed by multiplayer online battle arena games like League of Legends, which had 27 preferences. Real-time strategy games were selected in 25 responses. Simulation and sports games were the least favored genre, receiving 21 responses.

Regarding the range of avatar customization in the online games players use most often, 59 people reported an intermediate level of available customization. High level of avatar customization was the second most common option, selected by 57 people, and a low level of avatar customization was reported by 31 individuals.

4.2 Avatar customization and gender identity

Likeness of avatars with physical bodies. With reference to RQ1, which inquired how available options for avatar customization shape players' online experiences and gender identity, the study delved into the participants' perspectives on the congruency between their real-world physical appearance and the avatar options provided in video games. It employed a Likert scale ranging from strong disagreement to strong agreement with the statements: "Generally, I struggle to find avatar choices that resemble my physical body" and "I would like to use an avatar that resembles my physical self as much as possible." 14.3% of respondents strongly agree with the first assertion, while 26.5% agree and 25.9% take a neutral stance. 23.1% of people disagree, while 10.2% disagree strongly. Considering each value on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), the average of the responses for this first question is 3.07, SD equal to 1.3. Breaking down responses by gender, the average responses of female participants were as follows: female participants had

an average rating of 3.1, male participants' average is 2.8, while non-binary respondents report an average response of 3.7. Specifically, 8.3% female participants strongly agree, 28.3% agree, 33.3% are indifferent to the statement, 18.3% disagree and 6.6% strongly disagree. 11.8% male participants strongly agree, 15.7% agree, while 25.5% have a neutral opinion on this stance. By contrast, 27.5% male participants disagree with the statement and 15.7% disagree strongly. 27.8% non-binary persons strongly agree, while 36.1% agree and 11.1% have a neutral stance. 22.2% non-binary people disagree and none strongly disagree with the statement. In regards to the second assertion, 13.7% respondents strongly agree in preferring an avatar that resembles their physical self as closely as possible. 20.5% agree and 30.8% have a neutral opinion on this topic. Conversely, 21.2% disagree, while 13.7% are in strong disagreement. The average rating for this second question is 3, SD equal to 1.4. The outcomes from the evaluations of both statements are shown in Figure 2.

When asked about the choice for their avatar's gender, a non-binary interviewee reported that: "If in the game I'm playing there isn't an option for a non-binary character I try to choose the avatar option that appears more androgynous and that I can customize later. I make this choice because that's how I want to express myself and because that's how I want other players to see me. In games where I have more choices I can express in more detail how I feel based on my gender of the time. In my particular case I am genderfluid so I choose an avatar based on the gender I feel at that moment because I know that when I play in an online game I want others to refer to me by that gender."

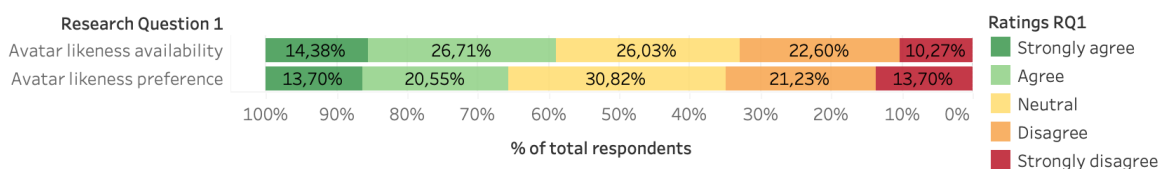


Figure 2. Avatar likeness availability and preference ratings.

Gender neutral avatars. What would it be like to interact in online worlds with an avatar that doesn't raise assumptions, but questions about gender identity and representation? When surveyed about the preference for genderless or non-gender-specific avatars in video games, a total of 52 respondents prefer avatars that do not refer to a specific gender, while 48 expressed an uncertain position and 37 preferred gender-specific avatars. As illustrated in Figure 3, upon examining these data by respondents' gender, the results were as follows: 19 females (13.5%) prefer non-gender-specific avatars, 20 (14.2%) are not sure, while 22 (12.8%) prefer gender-specific avatars. For male respondents, 13 (6.4%) prefer non-gender-specific avatars, 19 (12.8%) are undecided and 22 (15.6%) prefer gender-specific avatars. 20 non-binary respondents (15.6%) prefer non-gender-specific avatars, 9 (6.4%) are unsure, and 3 (2.8%) prefer gender-specific avatars.

Interviewees have expressed their positions on non-gender-specific avatars. One female player said: "When we talk about customizing an avatar we most often talk about binary genres, most online games fail to give you the choice of neutrality. I can think in very few cases, e.g. in Leagues of Legends, there are total gender neutral characters. I think the problem is that video games developers don't have the knowledge of non-binary genders. I would prefer not to have totally divided characters, if you take a female character it is usually stereotypically feminine, with makeup, long hair and wearing pink. Male avatars are either skinny or really muscular with colors that tend towards blue and black. Essentially there is no middle ground."

According to a non-binary interviewee: "I think having non-binary avatars as an option would result in a more immersive experience because they [other players and NPCs] relate to you as a person, the important parts of the game don't focus on your gender, but it focuses on you as a person."

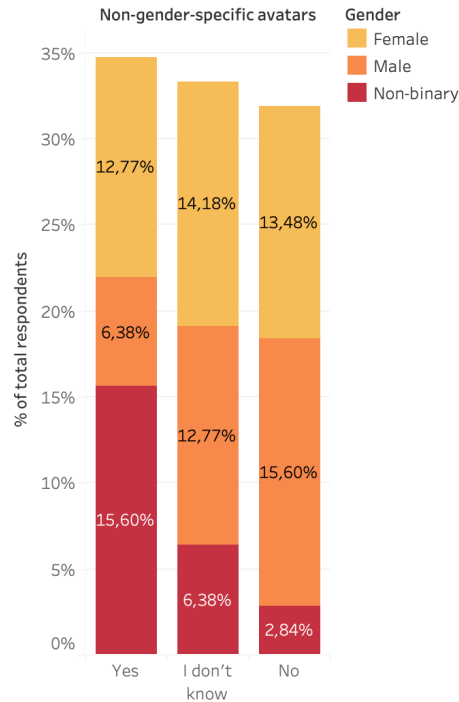


Figure 3. Bar chart representing each gender’s stance on non-gender-specific avatars.

4.3 Avatars and stereotypical gender norms

Video games as a masculine activity. When asked about their perception of the gaming industry, specifically whether it has relied on gender stereotypes, targeting video games as a masculine activity, the responses show that 67.4% of survey respondents agree with the statement. 19.1% think it’s not the case and 13.6% are unsure about it. This was inquired within the scope of RQ2, addressing the hypothesis that, historically, the perception of a male-centric target audience by the video game industry, may have contributed to the creation of stereotypes, predicated on a primarily masculine conception of gendered bodies. However, the landscape is changing with more female players and developers emerging, thus gradually breaking the longstanding stereotypes.

Stereotypical avatars. In relation to stereotypical gender norms commonly found in online games, survey respondents were asked if they feel a lack of representation for non-binary avatars. A 5-point Likert scale was used as a tool to analyze participants' preference on an ordered series ranging from “strongly agree”, ranked 5 points, to “strongly disagree”, ranked 1 point. As shown in Figure 4, 42.2% of respondents strongly agreed to this statement, 32.7% of people agreed and 17.7% of respondents took a neutral stance. On the other end of the spectrum, 4.8% people disagreed and 2.7% strongly disagreed with the statement. The average of the responses is 4.1, SD equal to 0.9.

Additionally, to delve into the gendered stereotypicality, survey respondents were asked, using the same Likert scale, to rate this set of statements: “Female characters in video games are often stereotypically depicted with exceptionally large breasts or a very narrow waist” and “Male characters in video games are often stereotypically depicted as big and muscular.” As shown in Figure 4, 36.1% of respondents strongly agreed and 49% agreed with the first assertion that female characters are often shown with exaggerated physical traits. 9.5% of people took a neutral stance and 5.4% disagree with this statement. The average for the first inquiry is 4.4, and the standard deviation is 0.8.

As for the portrayal of male characters, 21.8% of respondents strongly agree and 54.4% agree that male characters are often depicted as big and muscular. 13.6% of players have a neutral opinion, 9.5% disagree and 0.7% strongly disagree with this assertion. The average is 4.2, SD equal to 0.8. A female interviewee's take on this topic is that: “In fighting games [...] There was not really a choice, I remember when I was 10 years old, with my best friend, we would play a game where we would take female characters and see who was better at fighting and so on, because they are the weak characters.”

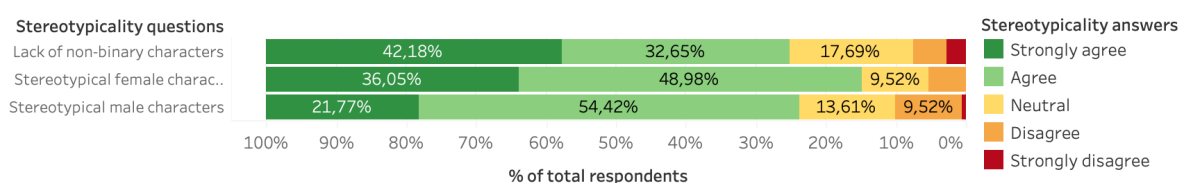


Figure 4. Ratings of stereotypicality questions.

Stereotypicality in female avatars. To dive deeper into the experiences specifically related to those who prefer to play with female avatars, survey respondents have been presented a 5-point Likert scale to rate their opinion on these assertions: “There is a lack of inclusivity in the choices available for female avatars” and “Male avatars have a broader range of possible customization than female avatars.” Points have been assigned to each answer, on a range from 5, “strongly agree”, to 1, “strongly disagree”. As shown in Figure 5, 17.2% of users of female avatars strongly agree with the first statement and 39.7% agree. 24.1% are unsure, 13.8% disagree and 5.2% strongly disagree. The average rating for lack of inclusivity in female avatars’ customization is 3.6, SD equal to 1. Regarding the second inquiry, 6.9% of users of female avatars strongly agree, 25.9% agree and 32.8% have a neutral opinion on this. Conversely, 19% disagree with the statement and 13.8% strongly disagree. The average rating for the second statement is 3.1, SD equal to 0.9.

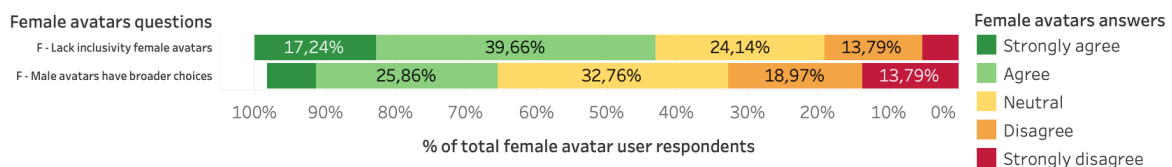


Figure 5. Assessment of users of female avatars' stance on female avatar customization options.

Additionally, users of female avatars have been asked whether having a feminine avatar made them feel stuck in stereotyped gender roles, even when irrelevant to the purpose of the game. 58 people answered this question, with 32 respondents indicating not to have perceived any pressure to conform to gender stereotypes. According to some, it was more about the visual aspect than any forced roles, while others found that the avatar's gender didn't affect their enjoyment of the game as long as there were diverse and non-stereotyped character options. In contrast, 15 respondents felt stuck in gender roles. This group reported

feeling pressure to adhere to traditional norms about gender expression, or feeling limited by the inability of female avatars to express male characteristics. This issue even extended to the types of actions they felt they could perform, such as being relegated to supporting roles in shooting games, due to the perceptions of female players' lack of abilities. 4 respondents indicated that this happens only sometimes and it is bound to a specific game or situation.

Stereotypicality in male avatars. Concurrently, users of male avatars have been presented a 5-point Likert scale to assess their appraisal of these assertions: "There is a lack of inclusivity in the choices available for male avatars" and "Female avatars have a broader range of possible customization than male avatars." To weigh their opinions, points ranging from 5, "strongly agree", to 1 "strongly disagree", have been assigned to each answer. Results are shown in Figure 6.

Concerning the first statement, 15.6% of users of male avatars strongly agree with the statement, while 25% agree and 28.1% have a neutral stance. On the contrary, 20.3% of people disagree and 9.4% strongly disagree with the instance. The average rating is 3.5, SD equal to 0.9. One respondent chose not to answer, because: "Some of my opinions may seem cynical but these are quite important questions, so I would like to articulate my answer. Almost all games so far allow me to put long hair on male avatars, there are some games where it's a bit shorter than female hair but I'm okay with it either way. Regarding the physiology of the bodies in many games there is less customization for male avatars, I don't complain because I like to play with muscular characters, if I can't be like that in real life at least in video games I can feel bulk, however sometimes I would like to create characters a little more plump."

For the second inquiry, 7.8% of users of male avatars strongly agree with the statement that female avatars have a broader range of customization than male avatars, while 21.9% agree and 29.7% have a neutral opinion. 29.7% of people disagree and 7.8% strongly disagree with the assertion. The average rating for this question is 3, SD equal to 1.3. There was one respondent that added: "I haven't noticed these discrepancies in

customization, maybe in games like The Sims female characters have more clothes that are fancier, while male ones have t-shirts, sweatshirts and suits with ties, a bit like real life. However, in the games I like to play [Ark, Dark Souls] the male and female clothes are the same, only changing in shape.”

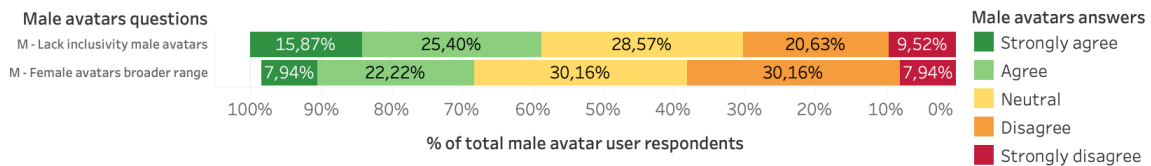


Figure 6. Assessment of users of male avatars' stance on male avatar customization options.

Moreover, the survey questioned if the use of a masculine avatar made participants feel confined to stereotypical gender roles, gathering 60 responses. Of these, 46 individuals indicated that they never encountered this specific sentiment, one respondent expressed the view that "gender stereotypes are managed quite well" in games, while another highlighted that the games they frequently played: "never even had a playable female character." One respondent stated: "if my avatar is a man, it's natural that he behaves like one." Conversely, 5 users of male avatars did feel forced into gender-normative roles. 7 reported experiencing this feeling sometimes, especially: "[...] if you don't show a high level playing in a game, some users will make fun of you, maybe because of the stereotype that male people must be good at games." The insight of a player is particularly detailed: "From my perspective, a protagonist's aesthetic similarity or gender alignment with my own isn't essential. What matters more is the resonance of their emotional experiences. As a bisexual person, I'm able to immerse myself into the roles of protagonists with different sexual orientations. I don't necessarily expect these characters to mirror my own identity or experiences in every aspect; in fact, I'm comfortable flexing my imagination to bridge any gaps. For instance, during romantic scenes in movies, I often find myself subconsciously substituting the protagonist

and their partner with myself and a person I'm attracted to, regardless of the characters' genders or even their form. Even if it's an anthropomorphic car like Lightning McQueen!"

4.4 Online players' interactions and gender binary

Gender binary. In the context of RQ3, which investigates how gendered dynamics impact online players' interactions, the study presented respondents with a 5-point Likert scale. Scores ranging from 1 to 5 have been assigned to the temporal values of the Likert scale, spanning from "always" to "never".

The survey sought to gather responses from participants regarding their perspective on being presented with only two gender options for an avatar. Results, represented in Figure 7, exhibit that, of the total respondents, 38.1% reported never feeling this option as a constrain. 13.6% rarely find it an issue, while 21.8% sometimes feel it as a limitation of gender choice. 15.6% of respondents usually find this binary choice to be a problem and 10.9% always find it restrictive. The average of the answers is 2.1%, SD equal to 1.5.

Breaking down these responses to see the outlook of the transgender population, the data, shown in Figure 8, highlight that 18% of respondents never find this choice to be a problem, 4.9% rarely consider it limiting and 26.2% sometimes feel it costarining. In contrast, 29.5% of respondents usually find it restrictive, and 21.3% always perceive it as limiting. The average rating of the trans* community to this statement is 3.4, SD equal to 0.8. Concerning the cisgender population, 50.6% reported to never feel this choice as limiting. 19.8% stated to rarely find it restricting and the same proportion applies to those who feel this way only sometimes. 6.2% of respondents usually find binary gender choices limiting, and the 3.7% always find it constraining. The average is 1.8, SD equal to 0.8.

When interviewed about this topic, a non-binary interviewee reported: "I start to think how the avatar's gender influences the gameplay, and if it doesn't affect it, I find that choice limiting. I don't know why it's so hard to add options that differ from the canonical binary gender, despite time passing and the LGBT+ community trying to stress this issue,

things often remain as they are. I mean, if you make a video game you should care about the players' experience!”

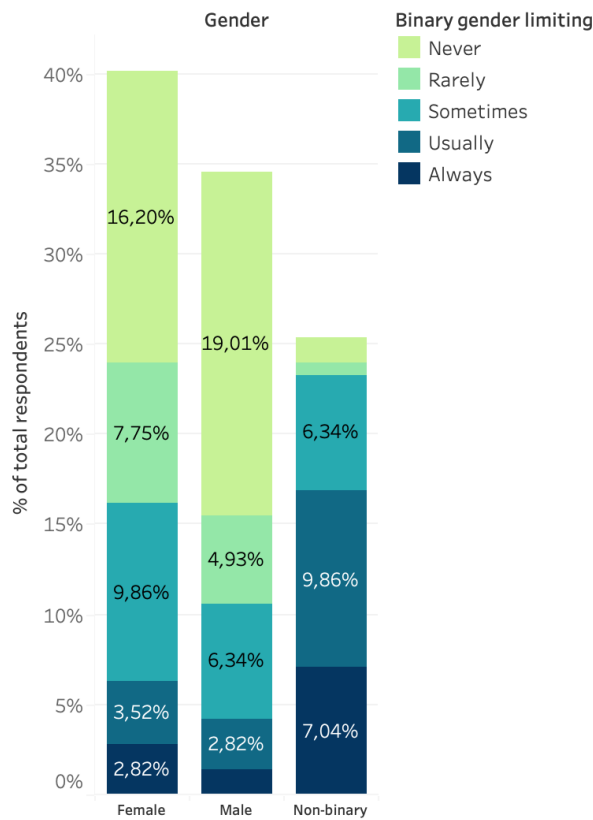


Figure 7. Frequency of deeming strictly binary gender avatar choices as limiting.

Trans*	Binary gender limiting				
	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Usually	Always
Yes	18,03%	4,92%	26,23%	29,51%	21,31%
No	50,62%	19,75%	19,75%	6,17%	3,70%

Figure 8. Detailed gender identity about Figure 7’s responses.

Different experience for different avatars. Inquiring the way this gendered dynamics influence players interactions online, as addressed by RQ3, results report that 85% of the survey respondents think there is a difference in how female-presenting avatars are treated, while the remaining 15% do not perceive such a discrepancy. Recurring themes in affirmative responses highlight the complex issues associated with gender representation in

the gaming community. Most commonly, these players note an increased sexualization and objectification of feminine avatars, with inappropriate advances and comments occurring frequently. They also encounter deep-rooted misogyny and sexism, often expressed through derogatory remarks, underestimation of abilities, and open harassment. The latter is not uncommon, with reports of verbal abuse, stalking, and other forms of aggression targeted at feminine avatars. For instance a survey respondent says: "Women, in general, are exposed to harassment and abuse (and a lack of grace) that men are not, especially online. You don't actually have to be a woman to get this, just have someone assume that you are a woman. Feminine avatars really contribute to this." These experiences are often coupled with patronizing behavior, where the competence and intelligence of these players are belittled, leading to uninvited assistance and "mansplaining". It's noteworthy that some respondents have also noticed a trend of differential treatment towards feminine avatars, such as receiving gifts or favorable treatment, which can easily turn into harassment if rejected. Furthermore, players using female avatars often report being perceived as weak or less capable, and their successes unfairly attributed to factors other than gaming skill. Lastly, respondents identified issues of identity disrespect, where female gamers or individuals using feminine avatars felt their identities were undermined or stereotyped. According to a non-binary interviewee, this issue goes beyond feminine avatars: "In Minecraft there is not a way to customize avatars and as soon as I said I was female, the behavior of other players drastically changed, either helping me or insulting me. It is a perceptible difference, and it's not the same when I say I am male. [...] There is the stereotype that girls don't know how to play. In Leagues of Legends saying that you are female makes insults suddenly cease. In different games there is different behavior of players." Another interviewee's similar experience is that: "I used to play on telegram at Inventory Bot where you can't choose any avatar, but they see your telegram picture so I had it blacked out. Most of the time when they thought I was a guy the treatment remained more neutral and if you had to buy items it was much more formal and mechanical. If they saw that you were a girl they treated you particularly well, I don't know how many things they gifted me. But as soon as you were no

longer tolerant of their jokes, immediately they treated you with less respect than if you were a noob [less experienced] male player.”

Misgendering. Concerning how the choice of avatar in video games can lead to mistaken gender assumptions, the experiences shared reveal an intriguing array of perspectives. 17 female, 13 male and 20 non-binary people have reported being mistaken for a different gender due to their avatar of choice. When asked more details about their experiences, several respondents reported choosing neutral or differently gendered avatars as a shield from potential online harassment, sexism, or homo-transphobia. This behavior was particularly evident in massive multiplayer online games, where some players used their avatar to avoid unwanted attention or prejudices. As a surveyed respondent reported: “When I was in high school, I intentionally played as very stereotypically masculine characters with the intent on being misgendered as male so that I wouldn't have to deal with harassment in MMOs and other online spaces. On Discord and other social media sites that aren't attached to my personal life (like Youtube vs Instagram), I intentionally choose a neutral sounding username and photo cause I just don't have the energy or willingness to deal with homophobia, transphobia, and sexism when I'm just trying to relax and have fun”. Others reported being comfortable with the misgendering, treating it as an understandable mistake, often corrected after communication. For some, it was more of an amusing incident than a distressing one. A noteworthy aspect is the influence of avatar choice on in-game interactions. Some respondents leveraged this, with one participant admitting to choosing a female avatar to receive in-game benefits from male players. However, the experience was not always neutral or positive. A few participants reported that the avatar-based misgendering was a source of distress, discomfort and dysphoria. Some respondents were bothered by the continued misuse of pronouns, even after correcting other players. A recurring theme was the lack of non-binary or gender-neutral avatar options, leading players to default to male or female avatars. Some trans* respondents used avatars to explore their gender identity, before they questioned their gender, so in their cases the “misgendering”

was a source of gender euphoria that led to a deeper exploration of the self. In summary, while some participants are comfortable with or benefit from the occasional misgendering, others find it distressing. Survey respondents were additionally asked if, in multiplayer online games that allow voice chats, they have used tools to modify the sound of their voice. 66% of respondents reported they've never used it, while 6.8% of participants did. 27.7% of people stated they have thought about it but eventually never did it.

4.5 Online harassment and avatar type

Frequency and kind of harassment. Pertaining to the scope of RQ4, experiences of cyberbullying have been explored. 60.5% of respondents report to have never experienced toxic behavior or abusive language in online video games, while 39.5% did. This latter group, as shown in Figure 9, comprises 43.1% of female players, 32.8% of male players and 24.1% of non-binary players.

Harassment?	Gender participants		
	Female	Male	Non-binary
Yes	43,10%	32,76%	24,14%
No	39,33%	35,96%	24,72%

Figure 9. Frequency of online harassment for each gender category.

When asked how often these harassments occur, 12.1% report to always experience it, while 41.4% experience it often and 27.9% sometimes. 8.6% have rarely experienced online harassment. To obtain these results, a 5-point Likert scale was employed, scores ranging from 5, “always”, to 1, “never”, have been assigned to the values of the Likert scale. The average rating for the frequency of online harassment is 3.3, SD equal to 0.8. Regarding which kind of remarks they have been subject, 75.9% of players report it to be sexist, 69% homophobic, 48.3% racist, 43.1% Transphobic and 2.8% ableist.

Frequency of harassment for avatar categories. What is the avatar category that receives the most negative comments? If users are given the option to choose a non-binary avatar, would it attract more harassment than other avatar types?

To answer these questions related to RQ4, the study further inquired into how often different types of avatars experience harassment. Figure 10 shows that the total number of female avatar users amounts to 95, with 54.9% of them having encountered cyberbullying of some form. Among the 104 male avatar users, 45.9% have been subjected to online harassment. In the case of non-binary avatar users, which total 86, 33.8% have experienced online harassment.

Total of avatar users		Experience harassment	
Avatar type		Avatar type	
Female avatars	95	Female avatars	54,89%
Male avatars	104	Male avatars	45,86%
Non-binary avatars	86	Non-binary avatars	33,83%

Figure 10. Total of players for each avatar category and the corresponding percentage that have faced online harassment while using an avatar of that type.

Delving deeper into how avatar conveyed gender intersects with online harassment, as shown in Figure 11, 5.3% of users of female avatars report to always experience some kind of persecution while playing online games and 28.6% state that it's usual. 18.8% encounter it sometimes, while 2.3% face it rarely. The average encounter of harassment for users of female avatars is 3.8, SD equal to 0.7. Regarding users of male avatars, 11.3% report to usually endure some kind of online harassment, 17.3% face it often, 16.5% suffer from it sometimes, while 0.7% face it rarely. The average for users of male avatars is 3.3, SD equal to 0.6. Concerning users of non-binary and gender-non-conforming avatars, 2.3% report to face it always, when playing online. 9.8% often encounter it, while 21.8% are sometimes subject to it. The average for this group is 3.2, SD equal to 0.4.

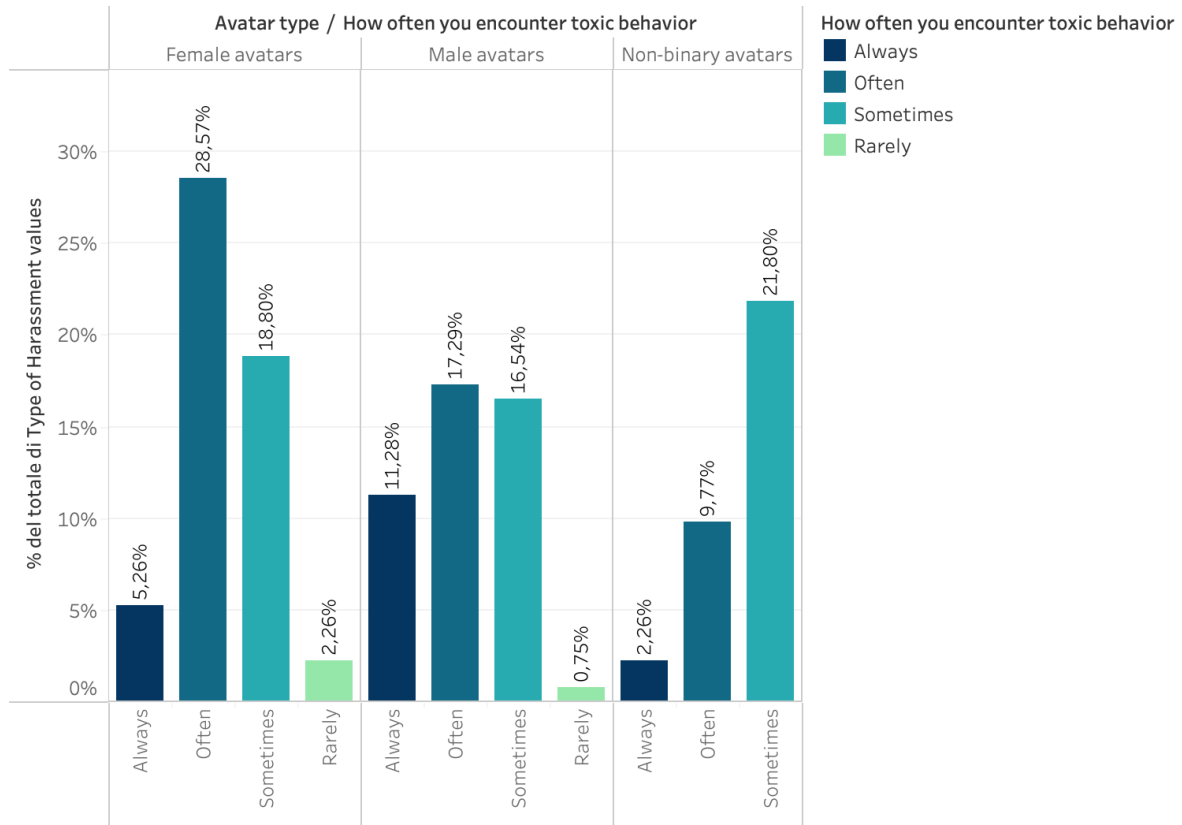


Figure 11. Comparative analysis of online harassment experiences amongst users of female, male, and non-binary avatars in online gaming.

Moreover, investigating the kinds of harassment different avatars face, as shown in Figure 12, it emerges that female avatars encounter 33.3% sexist, 27.5% homophobic, 21.6% racist, 13.7% transphobic and 3.9% ableist slurs, while male avatars face 31.4% sexist, 25.5% homophobic, 20.6% racist, 21.6% transphobic and 6.9% ableist remarks. Non-binary avatars face 26.5% sexist, 21.6% homophobic, 12.8% racist, 22.6% transphobic and 2.9% ableist remarks.

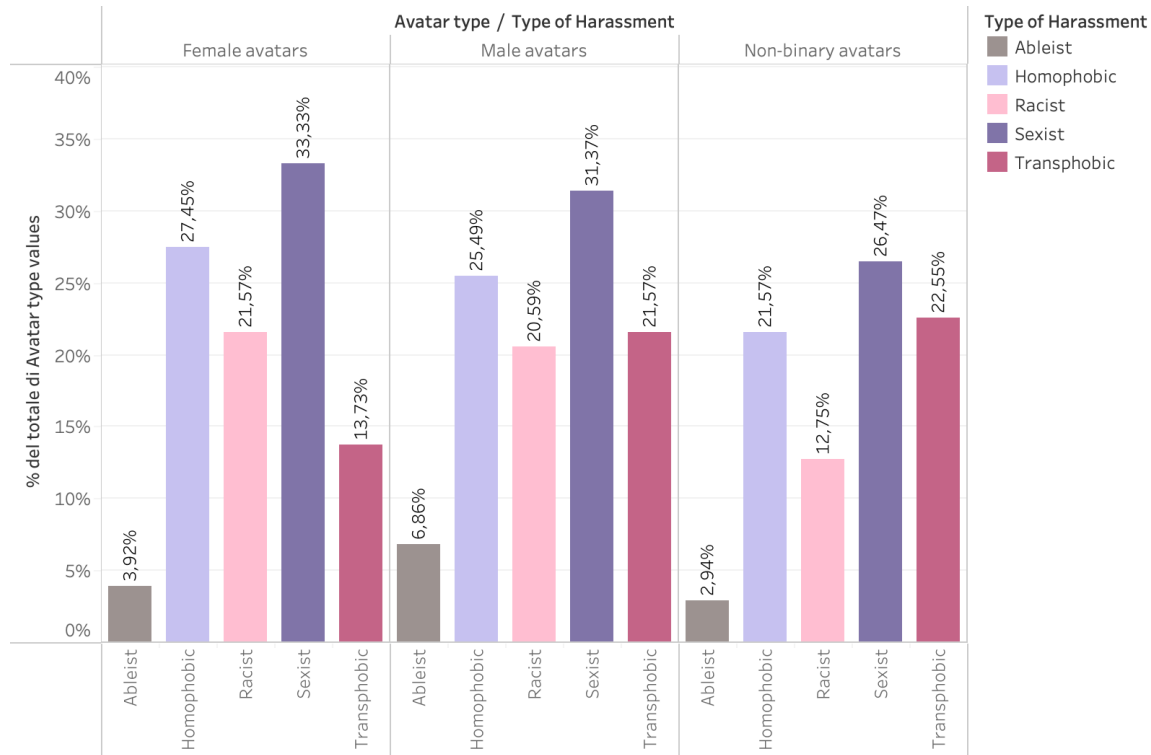


Figure 12. Breakdown of types of harassment experienced by users of female, male, and non-binary avatars in online gaming.

Mental health consequences. Online harassment can have profound implications for mental health, and those who encounter such negative comments could experience a range of negative psychological impacts. Based on the account given by an interview participant: “I remember a severe episode from 2019. I was playing Wolvesville, and in that game, [...] I experienced being jailed and receiving sexual comments in night chat for two following nights. Since then, I may have started using avatars that have less directly feminine features. For example, as of now for my avatar, I may use feminine hair paired with a masculine type of clothing, which is usually less revealing. I found screenshots of two avatars I used in 2019 after that situation happened and they are all fully neutral. [...] Now that is Pride Month the game celebrates it with rainbow outfits and if you wear it you are really prone to be targeted with homo-transphobic slurs.” Figure 13 represents the screenshots mentioned by the interviewee about their change in avatar customization.

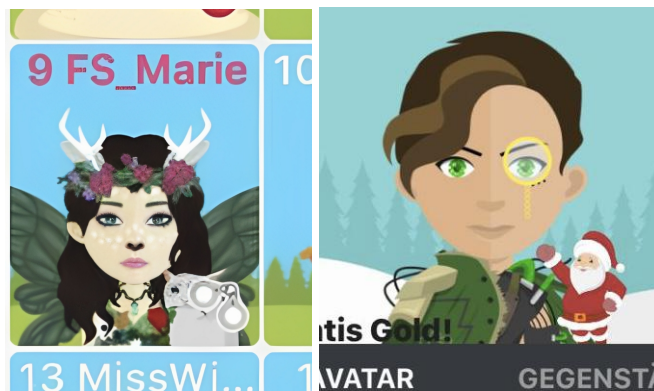


Figure 13. Interviewee’s screenshots of their avatar before and after an episode of sexualized cyberbullying.

Another interviewee reported that: “When I was playing in a purely Italian context, it was the fact that I was black in addition to being a girl, for which I suffered more harassment. I remember that a player a few positions higher than me got annoyed and circulated my picture photoshopping a gorilla and bananas on it. It totally changed my gaming experience, I was 13/14 years old at the time. From there I started to give less clues about my gender and skin color, I have no desire to relive certain traumas that no one will ever take away from me.” Lastly, a male interviewee adds that: “We males often insult each other but not in an offensive way, a kind of expression of affection.”

Non-binary experiences. Out of the 32 non-binary survey respondents who identify as trans* 53.1% have experienced online harassment specifically targeted at their gender identity and out of the total 36 non-binary respondents, 33.8% of them have faced cyberbullying. Investigating the severity of the negative effects suffered as a consequence of harassment from different kinds of avatar users, a 5-point Likert scale was employed, ranging from “extremely much”, rated 5, to “not at all”, rated 1. Findings, as shown in Figure 14, highlight that 5.2% of users of female avatars have suffered extremely from it, 15.2% very much, 14.4% slightly and 7.2% report to not have suffered any consequences. The average rating is 3.3, SD equal to 0.8. Concurrently, 12.4% of users of male avatars had suffered from

it very much, while 9.3% moderately and 8.9% slightly. 10.3% of users of male avatar have never experienced such negative consequences. The average rating is 2.8, SD equal to 0.7. Meanwhile, 5.5% of users of non-binary avatars have very much suffered negative mental health consequences, 20.6% moderately, 8.3% slightly and 3.1% have never endured negative consequences as a result of cyberbullying. The average rating is 2.8, SD equal to 0.7.

Transitioning into a more personal perspective, one non-binary interviewee shared the following experience: “The moment I say I am not a male cis suddenly my experience is not valid and I don't know how to play. If a game makes you happy and you spend time in it, when playing with people that discriminate against you because of your identity you don't take it very well. When some players find out I am trans* they find every way to insult me [...] Once in a game they killed me because I had a male avatar but with female features, they told me I was gay and they didn't want gays in the lobby. [...] I was playing and talking with this person who, at first, thought I was male and the moment that, days later, I told him I was genderfluid, he changed his attitude and we never played together again. A similar thing happened in Minecraft, I had a shared account with my sister and once they realized that we were not male, the 4/5 people we were always playing with in someone's lot, stopped inviting us. I don't think there is a rational motivation.”

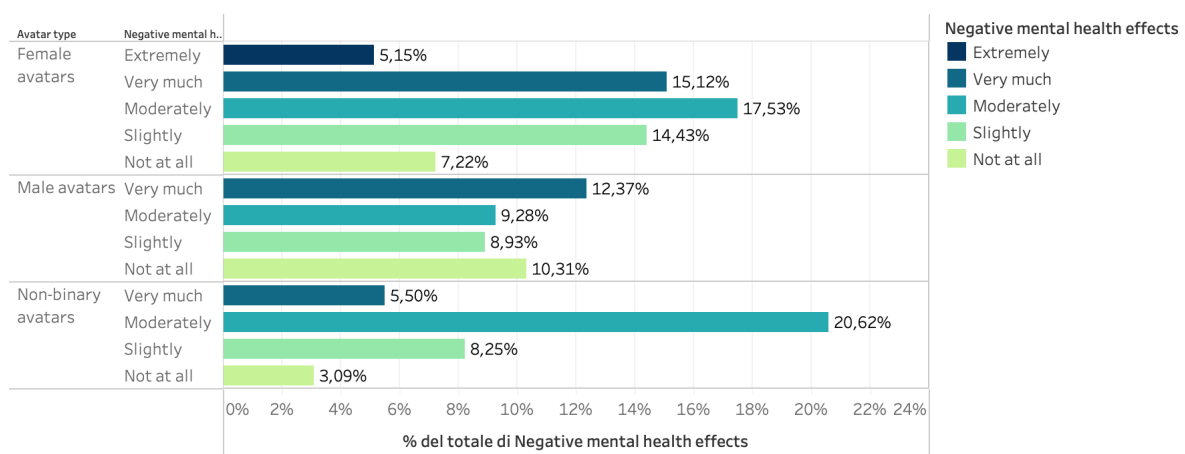


Figure 14. Assessment of the severity of mental health consequences suffered by users of female, male, and non-binary avatars due to online harassment.

5. Discussion and outcomes

5.1 Interpretations

Avatar customization and gender identity. The first inquiry of the research, RQ1, aimed to understand how avatar customization options in online video games can influence players' experience, specifically regarding gender identity. The research underlines a disparity in the world of online gaming: a significant segment of players, regardless of their gender, experiences difficulties in finding avatars that mirror their physical selves, as shown in Figure 2. This was particularly noted among non-binary respondents, who gave a higher average rating of the agreement to this struggle compared to male and female participants. Moreover, the study reveals a trend concerning the preference for avatar resemblance across genders: non-binary participants have shown a strong predilection for avatars that are closely aligned with their physical appearances. This preference further underscores the inadequacy of limited gender choices and supports the need for a more representative array of avatars. Interviews have supported the conclusions that players believe there is a disparity in gender representation in online gaming, bringing to the forefront the necessity for video game developers to increase the diversity of avatar options. As reported in [Chapter 4](#), results of the inquiry surrounding RQ1 have shown that players yearn for gaming experiences that transcend the traditional gender binary and permit a more fluid expression of gender identities, emphasizing individual traits over typical gender-based characteristics. This study's findings are supported by previous research, such as the investigation conducted by Lewis et al. (2017) in the realms of avatar likeness with physical bodies and how it networks with intersectionality. These results collectively highlight the need for video games to broaden avatar customization options, since the availability and quality of them can significantly influence players' online experiences, including their level of engagement, social interactions, and sense of identity. Addressing this need will not only enrich the online

experiences of players but also serve as a step forward in affirming and respecting diverse identities.

Avatars and stereotypical gender norms. The study's second research objective, RQ2, sought to examine how online avatars reflect or reinforce traditional gender norms and their influence on player dynamics in the online environment. In addressing these questions, our findings, as shown in Figure 4, suggest a prevalent belief among players that online avatars often reflect traditional gender roles. This perception appears to stem from the historically male-centered orientation of video games, a sentiment that was affirmed by a significant majority of respondents. Moreover, there was a strong consensus among participants regarding the inadequate representation of non-binary avatars. Similarly, most respondents agreed that binary-gendered avatars frequently exhibit gender stereotypes, resonating with conventional and hyperbolized portrayals of femininity and masculinity. These findings are supported by previous inquiries on this matter, like the study of DeWester et al., (2009), which investigated avatar's stereotypicality and found significant levels of sexualization and objectification of female avatars. Such stereotypical portrayals led to feelings of discomfort and frustration among a sizeable proportion of respondents. Players who prefer to mix traditionally feminine and masculine avatar items expressed concerns about a perceived lack of inclusivity in the available customization options. Interestingly, as Figure 5 and Figure 6 show, there was no consensus that the opposite gender avatar offered more customization options, debunking an assumption present in gaming communities. In terms of players' interactions with these gender norms, it is heartening to note that a majority of players reported not feeling pressured to conform to stereotypical gender roles when using avatars of either gender. This insight offers an encouraging reading that, while online avatars may reflect traditional gender roles, they do not necessarily impose these norms on players. In summation, while there is evidence that traditional gender roles are echoed in the design of avatars, their effect on players' self-expression and enjoyment of the

game is complex and multifaceted. As the broader understanding of gender norms continues to evolve, so too should the representation of gender in online gaming.

Online players' interactions and gender binary. The discourse surrounding RQ3, which aimed to assess how the previously inquired gendered dynamics impact online players, indicates that online gaming can be quite a different experience depending on the player's identity and avatar's conveyed gender. While binary gender selection didn't seem to be a problem for the majority of cisgender players, as shown in Figure 7, it was perceived as a limiting factor for those identifying as transgender or non-binary. The preponderance of surveyed players believe there is a disparity in how avatars presenting as female are treated in comparison to their male counterparts. This differential treatment presents itself as a spectrum of experiences, the negative extreme of which includes increased sexualization, objectification, harassment and belittling of capabilities. Some participants also pointed out that female avatars can receive special treatment, such as gifts, but this could escalate into harassment if the advances are unrequited. In the realm of misgendering, the experiences were similarly varied. A portion of players reported choosing neutral or oppositely gendered avatars as a strategy to mitigate potential online harassment, as the example shown in Figure 13, while others found it distressing, especially when it led to consistent misgendering even after correction. Nevertheless, a number of trans* respondents reported that, before they questioned their gender identity, they used avatars to explore their gender expression, highlighting how gaming can be a positive self-exploring mechanism, stressing the importance of the capacity of avatars to be able to provide for a great variety of representation, similarly to what findings in this area have already identified (Morgan et al., 2020). As an interviewee stated: "Using a female avatar used to lead me to think that I was denying my identity in a way. However, since I started hormone treatment this has radically changed, probably because I have also changed. Now I have no problem using female avatars because I don't need to confirm my identity."

A recurring theme was the lack of non-binary or gender-neutral avatar options, leading players that don't identify with binary gender to default to male or female avatars. In conclusion, while the realm of online gaming offers a unique platform for self-expression and identity exploration (McKenna et al., 2022), the findings reported in **Chapter 4** suggest that it continues to be impaired by conventional gender norms and stereotypes, impacting the design of avatars which then influences the interactions between players.

Online harassment. RQ4 addressed how avatars that challenge traditional gender norms influence players' experience, particularly in dealing with cyberbullying. The findings, shown in Figure 9, reveal that a substantial portion of the gaming community has been subjected to some form of toxic behavior or abusive language, and the avatar's conveyed gender appears to significantly impact the frequency and nature of harassment experienced by the player. As depicted in Figure 10, female players have reported a higher frequency of harassment than their male counterparts, yet the experience of cyberbullying is not strictly confined to the gender of the player but extends to the gender of the avatar as well. Users of female avatars have been found to experience cyberbullying more often than any other kind of avatar users, however users of male avatars also face significant rates of harassment. The type of harassment faced also seems to be influenced by the avatar's gender, with different forms of sexism, homophobia, racism, transphobia and ableism being experienced to varying degrees by users of different avatar genders, as depicted in Figure 12. This suggests that online harassment in video games impacts players of different gender identities, sexual orientations, races, and ethnicities. To sidestep the pervasive sexism, users often resort to male avatars or, if available, to avatars that fall outside stereotypical femininity and traditional gender norms. As one respondent of our study stated, "The fact that you're a female can become a point of demeaning, somewhat analogous to a woman piloting an aircraft or lifting a weight heavier than a man. There's sometimes envy, they tend to treat you poorly simply if you reach high game levels, have a good account, or know what you're doing." Moreover, it's a valid possibility that the general level of harassment reported by

users of male avatars could be traced to the fact that male players use insults as a twisted social dynamic of affection and camaraderie, as reported by an interviewee: “We males often insult each other but not in an offensive way, a kind of expression of affection.”

Lastly, the experiences of non-binary players are particularly insightful on the need for increased awareness of how online avatar experiences intersect with gender identity. Some players shared their experiences of being discriminated against, insulted, and marginalized once their non-binary identity was revealed or assumed based on their avatar choice. As one interviewee recounted: “Once in a game they killed me because I had a male avatar but with female features, they told me I was gay and they didn't want gays in the lobby.” By understanding the complex dynamics at play, game developers, communities, and platforms can work towards fostering a more supportive gaming culture, where players can fully enjoy their gaming experiences without fear of harassment or discrimination.

5.2 Key findings

A critical takeaway from this study is that non-binary avatars, if adequately incorporated, can potentially shield players, especially female gamers, from receiving sexist remarks. However, these disguises can simultaneously trigger online harassment for their non-adherence to traditional gender norms, leading to a double-edged sword situation. When players express a deviation from the hegemonic norm –overwhelmingly depicted as a white, heterosexual, cisgender male– they may endure adverse repercussions, as reported by the testimony of an interviewee: “[...] At first, he thought I was male and the moment that, days later, I told him I was genderfluid, he changed his attitude and we never played together again.” These may encompass ostracism from the game’s online community, or in other cases such as in game lobby, the outright rejection of non-binary avatars. As in the example of the testimony from a non-binary participant, who recounted being digitally “killed” and subjected to homophobic comments due to their avatar's non-binary appearance. The

remedial proposition derived from the findings is to amplify the representation of non-binary avatars in both online and offline video games, to aim at gradually normalizing their presence. Thus, in an attempt to change the norming narrative, the final aim of this research is to produce guidelines that can help to attenuate the reported endemic sexism and heteronormativity within gaming environments. It's crucial to note that giving players a choice to select avatars that align with their identity could serve as a way to open the doors to the world of video games for those who might be hesitant to approach it, fearing they do not fit the stereotypical target audience. This not only enhances the accessibility of the gaming universe, but it aims to gradually detach traditional western gender stereotypes from online environments, establishing a more equitable experience for all participants.

Ultimately, broadening the scope of diversity and enhancing accessibility within gaming environments could leverage on the *Proteus Effect* (Yee & Bailenson, 2007), making a tangible impact on players' real-world experiences. This could potentially heighten a sense of acceptance and openness towards diversity in their day-to-day life experiences.

5.3 Guidelines

Considering the implications of the research's findings, a series of guidelines were identified to transcend and *queerify* binary norms, embracing the multifaceted expressions within gaming environments and communities.

1. *Radical inclusion*: Actively incorporate, in customization options, a broader range of items and *skins* that don't adhere to traditionally stereotypical concepts of femininity and masculinity.
2. *Beyond binary*: In scenarios where the character's gender is relevant to the gameplay, present options that extend beyond the binary male/female framework. It's essential to avoid labeling these options as "other" to prevent feelings of alienation among players who identify outside binary genders. If in doubt about how

to handle the concept of gender within the game, it may prove essential to involve non-binary and trans* people in the design or in beta-testings.

3. *Pronoun preference and neutral language:* In instances where non-playable characters (NPCs) interact with the player, offer a customizable choice allowing players to select their preferred pronouns. Beyond this, it's crucial to adopt neutral language throughout in-game texts. For languages such as Italian, which traditionally default to the masculine form when the gender is unspecified or mixed, efforts should be made to avoid this overextended usage. Instead, strive for more balanced phrase construction that does not perpetuate gender biases.
4. *Gender neutrality:* Consider providing the same avatar starting base that players could further customize according to their preference. Alternatively, in instances where additional customization may not be possible, it's crucial the inclusion of gender neutral avatars along the conventional binary choice of male/female avatars.
5. *Unsegregated customization:* In games featuring customization, avoid segregating available items into different "closets". Instead, allow any kind of avatar to select for all possible available items, thereby promoting freedom and inclusivity.
6. *Optional gender visibility:* If relevant and applicable, consider providing options that allow players to conceal their gender or opt-out from viewing other player's gender.
7. *Representation:* Make a conscious effort to include a wide array of skin tones and body sizes in character design. Additionally, in instances where avatars are predefined, it's essential to ensure the hairstyles associated with different skin tones are culturally congruent and appropriate.
8. *Inclusive accessories:* Consider offering avatar items that can encompass the broadest variety of players, for example including assistive technology items or Hijabs. Further additions could include the possibility to add wrinkles and gender-affirming surgery scars to the avatars' bodies.
9. *Disrupt heteronormativity:* When the gameplay involves romantic interests, strive to avoid heteronormative biases. Allow players to choose the gender of their in-game romantic interest, with the freedom to modify this selection in the future.

10. *Safety*: Particularly important in online games –and in social communities connected to a game– is the implementation of an efficient moderation method, whereby rapidly responding to reports of harassment and discrimination. Encourage a culture of respect and security within the game and online communities, stimulate collective care.

6. Conclusions

6.1 Concluding summary

Virtual environments are vulnerable to real-world biases, especially those related to gender norms, with encountered occurrences of discrimination and sexism, mostly against players who don't conform to usual gender identities. This research delved into the less-explored experiences of those employing non-binary game characters, aiming to investigate gender representation within this domain. Further, this research strived to make a significant contribution by creating solutions for the identified issues. Hence, the key objective was to develop a set of **guidelines** to transcend and *queerify* binary norms, in the aim of prompting a diverse environment that accepts the varied expressions of gender within online gaming. This is consequential to the fact that, as discussed in **Chapter 2**, while avatars provide a platform to explore gender expression without the fear of judgment or harm, there is a gap in scholarly literature regarding non-binary avatars users' experiences. Therefore, this study sought to delve deeper into these less-explored instances, focusing on the impact and influence of binary gender in avatar customization, and the latter's subsequent impact on gender identity.

To investigate these complex dynamics, as reported in **Chapter 3**, this research employed a mixed-method approach rooted in feminist and queer theory, where quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed simultaneously, giving importance to the

notion that the understanding of gender is a personal issue, and as such, it's a concept unique for each individual. The primary data sources were a survey and in-depth interviews with selected respondents. Diversity and ethics were prioritized in all aspects of the research: by means of a diverse range of platforms for participant recruitment, employing inclusive language, and offering participants the choice to opt out of sensitive questions. Data normalization and analysis were performed using Google Sheets and Tableau. Quantitative and qualitative data were examined using statistical calculations and thematic analysis, providing a rich understanding of player perceptions, interpretations of avatar customization, and gender representation.

The data gathered from this inquiry, documented in [Chapter 4](#), has established the profound role of avatar customization in defining players' online experiences, answering RQ1, which asked: How do the available avatar customization options shape players' online experiences, specifically regarding their representation of gender identity? A considerable number of players, remarkably those identifying as non-binary, reported challenges to find avatars that mirrored their physical selves, emphasizing the necessity for an array of avatars that goes beyond binary genders. The quality and availability of avatar customization options are critical, as they significantly impact players' engagement, social interactions, and sense of self within the gaming community. The study further inquired about the subject, in an attempt to answer RQ2, which asked: To what extent do users feel that online avatars reflect or reinforce traditional gender roles? The findings, as reported in [Chapter 5](#), indicate that avatars often perpetuate stereotypical binary gender models and that the internalization of societal gender norms within virtual environments impacts how avatars are treated based on their perceived gender. Female avatars, in particular, are more likely to be objectified, sexualized, and underestimated, indicating a pervasive sexist bias that necessitates a re-evaluation of gender dynamics within virtual spaces. To seek to understand the impact of these assessed gendered dynamics on online player's experiences, in RQ3 the research asked: How are these gendered dynamics experienced in interacting with other players? These interactions disclosed the prevalent issue of online harassment, often influenced by the

gender of the avatar: users of female avatars generally reported more frequent sexist harassment and unsolicited sexual comments, while male avatar users are not exempt from negative experiences, pointing toward a complex web of social dynamics that requires additional unpacking.

In the last inquiry, RQ4, the study asked: How do avatars that challenge traditional gender norms impact players, specifically in facing online harassment? Results, discussed in **Chapter 5**, exhibit that users of avatars that deviate from western traditional gender norms are seemingly more subject to discrimination and marginalization. Hence, the conclusion is that using non-binary avatars can influence players' experiences, specifically with an increased possibility of receiving homotransphobic comments. This issue not only affects the gaming experience, but potentially deters users from exploring gender identity within online spaces.

Based on these findings, the study proposed **guidelines** to counteract binary norms and encourage multifaceted gender expressions within gaming communities. The recommendations include: incorporation of a broader range of gendered and non-gendered avatars, adoption of preferred pronouns and neutral language use, diverse representation in customization options, optional gender visibility, and implementing efficient moderation methods to tackle harassment and discrimination. Enactment of these guidelines could help cultivate a more diverse and respectful gaming culture.

This research is not without its limitations and future research should aim to address the gaps, to understand non-binary avatar users' experiences more comprehensively, and measure the impact of the proposed guidelines on fostering equity in gaming environments.

In conclusion, this research underscores the pressing need for gaming developers to rethink avatar customization options and challenge traditional heteronormative gender norms. Adopting the proposed guidelines would create more diverse and equitable gaming outlets, allowing for broader expression of gender identities and making online gaming a safer and more enjoyable experience for all players.

6.2 Limitations and future research

Limitations. The research has multiple limitations that are important to consider when interpreting and extrapolating from our findings, for example the lack of significant geographical diversities and the absence of representation of participants from Africa. This deficiency limits the generalizability of the findings, as cultural contexts majorly influence how individuals perceive gender and how they interact with digital avatars. Another significant limitation of the work is that it lacks a thorough investigation on how disability intersects with the other factors we considered. The researcher understands that disability can greatly influence an individual's experience, and could potentially influence avatar selection and interpretation. By not exploring this aspect, the understanding of the experiences of individuals with disabilities within the context of avatar selection remains incomplete. Additionally, this research failed to investigate how the avatars chosen for video games may differ from or be similar to those chosen for social media platforms. These different digital contexts may have unique influences in online games avatar selection, which were not addressed. Furthermore, the ample use of Likert scale responses, treated as ordinal data, might present certain limitations. Indeed, this kind of data might be subject to the influence of social desirability bias, cultural differences in topic sensitivity, and acquiescence. Moreover, the researcher planned to examine, through a preliminary survey, the level of interpretation and reception of gender expression of avatars. Eventually, this investigation was not carried out due to time constraints. This would have allowed the creation of a baseline for inquiring the online gender expression perceived by survey respondents. Even with these limitations, the research remains relevant and hopefully valuable in contributing to investigate digital interactions and identities. Moreover, it sets the groundwork for future studies to address the gaps identified in this project, fostering a more comprehensive understanding of digital identities and expressions.

Future work. Future studies in this area could build on the insights gained from this research. A good starting point is to undertake a more detailed investigation, to comprehend the unique experiences faced by non-binary avatar users and to discern the particular harassment patterns to which they are subjected. Doing so could give a better understanding of the complex issues that those not conforming to traditional gender norms encounter in gaming environments. Further research should also strive to include more participants from non western countries, as this provides a more comprehensive understanding of global avatar interpretation and selection. Another lack of this study that could be bridged by future research is the investigation of the intersection of disability and online gender representation. Moreover, future research should consider carrying out a preliminary investigation on how players perceive the gender expressed by different online avatars. This could bring to a better understanding of the participants' initial perceptions and experiences related to gender expression in gaming contexts. It would also be valuable to study the long-term effects of online harassment on players' mental health and well-being. It will give a more complete picture of the potential harm and offer information on building effective support systems for those affected. Further, it would be helpful to investigate how effective the outcome **guidelines** would prove in assessing their potential for fostering more inclusive and respectful gaming environments. By measuring their impact, we can see if these interventions are actually helping in making gaming spaces more inclusive and respectful. Eventually, researchers, game developers and gamers could work together to bring about real change and make sure everyone, no matter their gender, can enjoy online gaming without having to worry about discrimination or harassment.

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Appendix

1. Website

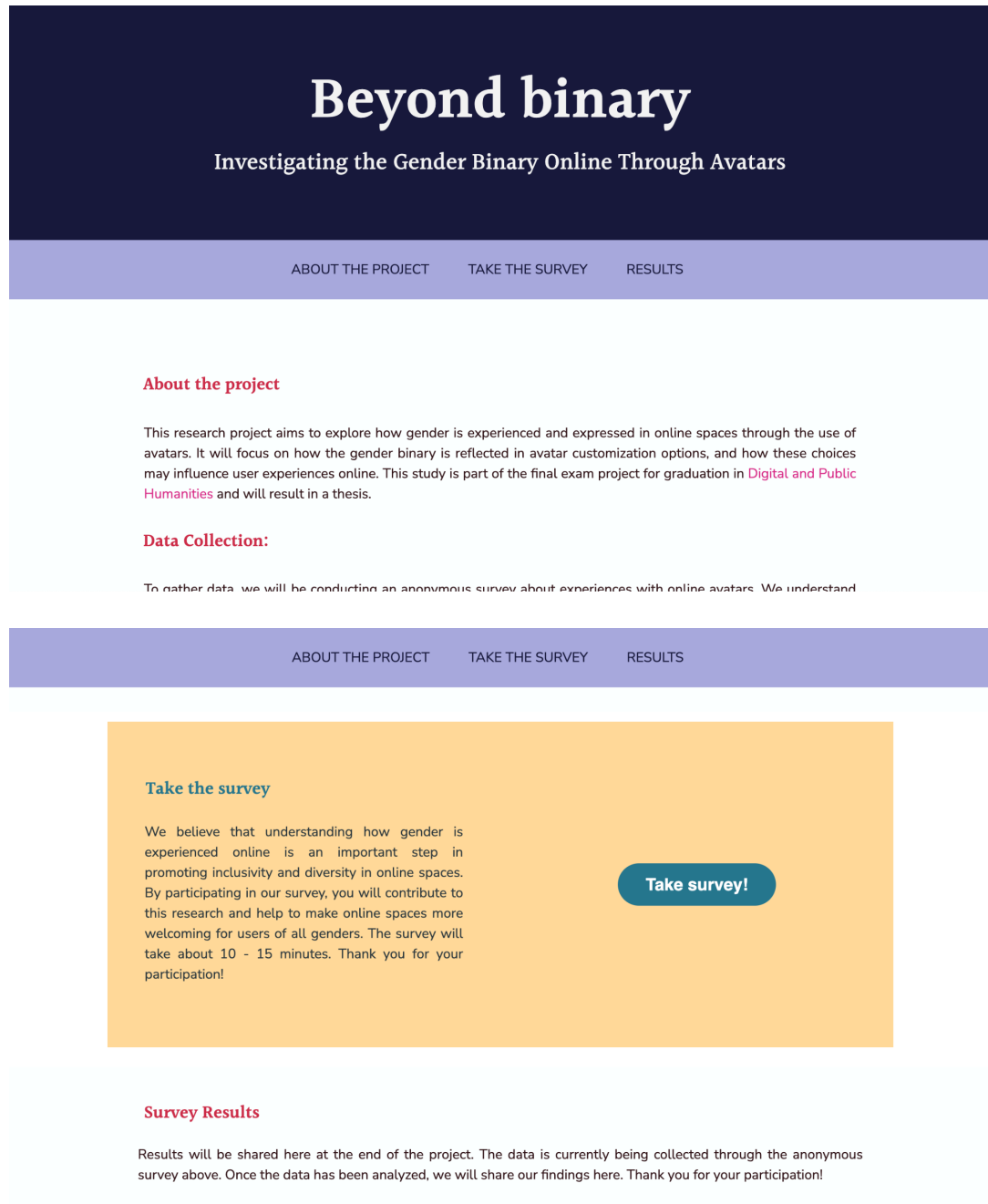


Figure 15. Screenshots of the website at the time of data collection through the survey.

2. Survey

Q: PRIVACY STATEMENT: All data collected in this survey is anonymous, and any respondents' personal information will be kept private. The data collected will be used for academic purposes only and will remain confidential.

A: yes, No

Section 2: About you

Q: What is your age group?

A: Under 15, 15-18, 19-24, 25-30, 31-35, 36-44, 45-54, 55-64, 65+

Q: Which continent are you from?

A: Europe, North America, Asia, South America, Australia, Africa

Q: What is your ethnicity?

A: White / Caucasian, Asian or Pacific Islander, Hispanic, Latino/a, or of Spanish origin,

Prefer not to answer, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaskan Native,

Other

Q: Are you a person living with a disability?

A: Yes, No, Prefer not to disclose

Q: What is your sexual orientation?

A: Queer, Heterosexual, Bisexual, Asexual, Pansexual, Demisexual, Lesbian, Gay,

Other

Q: What is your gender?

Q: Are you transgender (or another non-cisgender identity)?

A: Yes, No

Section 3: Welcome to the section dedicated to trans* persons

Q: Before coming out as trans*, do you recall using avatars to experiment with your gender?

Q: Have you ever felt excluded or unwelcome on an online platform based on your gender identity or avatar representation?

Q: Do you find that relating to other online players is easier than relating to people in real life?

A: Strongly agree, Agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Disagree, Strongly disagree

Q: Do you choose not to play video games that financially benefit individuals or companies with a history of transphobic behavior, such as the recent "Hogwarts Legacy"?

A: Yes, always, Sometimes, depending on the severity of the behavior, No, I do not consider the company's history of transphobic behavior when playing video games, Other

Q: Have you experienced online harassment specifically targeted at your gender orientation?

A: Yes, No

Q: How often do you experience gender dysphoria?

A: Always, Usually, Sometimes, Rarely, Never

Q: Playing a videogame with an avatar that matches your gender identity momentarily eases gender dysphoria.

A: Strongly agree, Agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Disagree, Strongly disagree

Section 4: Welcome to the section that explores your experience in online games and platforms

Q: What genre of online video games do you usually play?

A: Sandbox (Minecraft, The Sims), Role-playing (Fallout, World of Warcraft and Elder Scrolls Online), Action-adventure (Assassin's Creed), Puzzlers and party games (Sheffer Crossword and Skribbl), Platformer (Cuphead, Super Mario Online), Shooter (Halo, DOOM and Gears of War), Survival and horror (Resident Evil Outbreak), Multiplayer online battle arena (League of Legends), Real-time strategy (Age of Empires), Simulation and sports (Forza Motorsport)

Q: What level of avatar customization offers the video games you play most often?

A: High customization, Neither high nor low customization, Low customization

Q: Would you prefer avatars in video games not to refer to a specific gender?

A: Yes, No, I don't know

Q: Generally, I don't find avatar choices that resemble my physical body.

A: Strongly agree, Agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Disagree, Strongly disagree

Q: I would like to use an avatar that resembles my physical self as much as possible.

A: Strongly agree, Agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Disagree, Strongly disagree

Q: Male characters in video games are often stereotypically depicted as big and muscular.

A: Strongly agree, Agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Disagree, Strongly disagree

Q: Female characters in video games are often stereotypically depicted with exceptionally large breasts or a very narrow waist.

A: Strongly agree, Agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Disagree, Strongly disagree

Q: There is a lack of representation of gender-neutral or non-binary characters in video games.

A: Strongly agree, Agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Disagree, Strongly disagree

Q: Do you feel that using a gender-neutral or non-binary avatar could help to promote inclusivity and diversity online?

A: Strongly agree, Agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Disagree, Strongly disagree

Q: In multiplayer video games where you can speak vocally, have you ever used tools to modify the sound of your voice?

A: Yes, No, I have thought about it, but I've never done it

Q: Have you ever been subjected to harassment while playing online video games?

A: Yes, No

Q: How often do you encounter toxic behavior or language in online video games?

A: Always, Often, Sometimes, Rarely, Never

Q: To which of these remarks have you been subjected while playing online video games?

A: Sexist, Homophobic, Racist, Transphobic, Other

Q: Have you experienced any negative mental health effects as a result of online harassment while playing video games?

A: Extremely, Very much, Moderately, Slightly, Not at all

Q: Have you ever had to change your username or create a new account to avoid harassment or stalking from other players?

A: Yes, No

Q: In games where you can only choose between male and female gender, have you ever felt this choice limiting?

A: Always, Usually, Sometimes, Rarely, Never

Q: Have you ever been mistaken for a different gender based on your avatar representation?

A: Yes, No

Q: If you want you can describe your experience about being misgendered based on your avatar.

Q: Do you suffer, or have you suffered from a gaming disorder?

A: Yes, No, I'm not sure

Q: Do you think that the industry of video games has relied on gender stereotypes, targeting video games as a masculine activity?

A: Yes, No, I don't know

Q: Do you think there is a difference in how people treat users who perceive as female?

A: Yes, No

Q: In what way do you think users with feminine avatars are treated differently?

Section 5: Avatar preference

Q: On social media profiles, you prefer to use

A: Female and feminine avatars, Male and masculine avatars, Gender-neutral and non-binary avatars

Q: Have you noticed a difference in your avatar preference between competitive and non-competitive video games?

A: I use avatars of the same gender for both types of games, I don't play competitive video games, I use avatars of the different gender according to the type of game, I don't play non-competitive video games

Q: Which types of avatars do you usually use in competitive video games? And in non-competitive video games?

Q: In the video games you play most often, you prefer to use

A: Female and feminine avatars, Male and masculine avatars, Gender-neutral and non-binary avatars

Section 6: Female and feminine avatars section

Q: There is a lack of inclusivity in the choices available for female avatars, such as no short hair or one-sized bodies.

A: Strongly agree, Agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Disagree, Strongly disagree,
Other

Q: Male avatars have a broader range of possible customization than female avatars.

A: Strongly agree, Agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Disagree, Strongly disagree,
Other

Q: Have you experienced online harassment when using a female avatar?

A: Always, Usually, Sometimes, Rarely, Never

Q: Did/does having a female or feminine avatar make you feel stuck in stereotyped gender roles even when they were not relevant to the purpose of the game?

Q: If you were assigned a male avatar would it make you feel uncomfortable?

A: Yes, Probably yes, No, Probably no

Q: How would you feel if you were assigned a gender-neutral or non-binary avatar?

Q: If you previously stated that you don't exclusively use female avatars, click accordingly to continue the survey.

A: I only use female avatars, take me to the final part, I also use male avatars, I also use gender-neutral or non-binary avatars

Section 7: Male and masculine avatars section

Q: There is a lack of inclusivity in the choices available for male avatars, such as no long hair or one-sized bodies.

A: Strongly agree, Agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Disagree, Strongly disagree,
Other

Q: Female avatars have a broader range of possible customization than male avatars.

A: Strongly agree, Agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Disagree, Strongly disagree,
Other

Q: Have you experienced online harassment when using a male avatar?

A: Always, Usually, Sometimes, Rarely, Never

Q: Did/does having a male or masculine avatar make you feel stuck in stereotyped gender roles even when they were not relevant to the purpose of the game?

Q: If you were assigned a female avatar would it make you feel uncomfortable?

A: Yes, Probably yes, No, Probably no

Q: How would you feel if you were assigned a gender-neutral or non-binary avatar?

Q: If you previously stated that you don't exclusively use male avatars, click accordingly to continue the survey.

A: I only use male avatars, take me to the final part, I also use gender-neutral or non-binary avatars

Section 8: Gender-neutral and non-binary avatars section

Q: I think it's hard to find gender-neutral or non-binary avatars in most popular video games.

A: Strongly agree, Agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Disagree, Strongly disagree

Q: I think it's hard to find gender-neutral or non-binary avatars in less-known video games.

A: Strongly agree, Agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Disagree, Strongly disagree

Q: Have you experienced online harassment when playing with a gender-neutral or non-binary avatar?

A: Always, Usually, Sometimes, Rarely, Never

3. Interviews

Interview questions

[Accepts GDPR privacy statement?]

Q1: What level of avatar customization offers the video games you play most often?

Q2: What's your opinion on avatars that don't refer to a specific gender?

Q3: Can you explain how you chose the gender of your online avatar In the video games you play most often?

Q4: How do you feel when the gender options for online avatars are limited to the binary choices of male and female?

Q5: Have you noticed differences in the ways male and female avatars are treated or perceived online?

Q6: Have you ever felt pressured to choose a particular gender for your online avatar?

Q7: Could you describe any online harassment experience?

Q8: Can you describe any experiences where your online avatar's gender affected your interactions or experiences in the digital space?

Q9: What changes would you like to see in how online avatars represent gender?

Interview 1

INTERVIEWEE 1 (23, European, Caucasian, Asexual, Cis, Female)

[Accepted GDPR privacy statement]

Q1: What level of avatar customization offers the video games you play most often?

INTERVIEWEE 1: Generally, I play games with a high level of customization (like the Sims and Wolvesville).

Q2: What's your opinion on avatars that don't refer to a specific gender?

INTERVIEWEE 1: I guess I would prefer to have that choice in games because, in the games I've played, it was not important to assume what gender are the other players. I feel that in online games most often there is a focus on one gender as the target audience (either male or female) thus the available customization might be higher for only one gender. So if someone identifies as multiple genders, or if they don't align with the gender binary, it's rare that they find suitable customization options. There are more than two genders and it would be crucial if avatar customization took that more into account.

Q3: Can you explain how you chose the gender of your online avatar In the video games you play most often?

INTERVIEWEE 1: I usually just go to the female version but I'm happy to use male clothes for avatars because they're less revealing. I think it's cool when you can choose from different types of clothings, like I usually don't use female outfits because I think that feeling clothings have this focus on people's boobs basically, so I'm like let's go for a more traditional way that is not so much "in your face" that this is female, so then I just go for the male version which looks almost the same, but is less revealing. It's more a preference of design, I would say.

Q4: How do you feel when the gender options for online avatars are limited to the binary choices of male and female?

INTERVIEWEE 1: Personally, I don't mind because I'm usually fine using female avatars, but what I really think it's really important to me is that there is a third option, which could be diverse or whatever because I feel it is really crucial that everyone is represented. There are people having biologically both sexes or also if it's not biological, there are people who don't identify as female or male and it's important they get represented. So while it does not directly affect me, it affects me know I have friends that don't feel represented and that makes me sad because I care for my friends so I feel for them.

Q5: Have you noticed differences in the ways male and female avatars are treated or perceived online?

INTERVIEWEE 1: Cute avatars can get less or more targeted, also the same happens if they look evil or look ugly. Also, female avatars are more prone to receive sexual comments, but also if they're beautiful. It's like "pretty privilege" but also "pretty curse".

Q6: Have you ever felt pressured to choose a particular gender for your online avatar?

INTERVIEWEE 1: I would say not really often, but probably since the harassment episode I've talked about, I may have started using avatars that have less directly feminine features. For example, as of now for my avatar, I may use feminine hair paired with a masculine type of clothing, which is usually less revealing. I found screenshots of two avatars I used in 2019 after that situation happened and they are all fully neutral. It was also at a time where my avatar choices were pretty limited because I was pretty new to the game and I didn't want to spend money to get more options faster [usually the more you play the more avatar customization elements you unlock].

Q7: Could you describe any online harassment experience?

INTERVIEWEE 1: I remember a severe episode from 2019. I was playing the game I've already mentioned (Wolvesville), and in that game, which is like an online mafia game based on *Lupus in Fabula*, there is this jailer role that can talk to a selected player at night and also has a bullet which they can use. I experienced being jailed and receiving sexual comments in night chat for two following nights. Since then, I may have started using avatars that have less directly feminine features. For example, as of now for my avatar, I may use feminine hair paired with a masculine type of clothing, which is usually less revealing. I found screenshots of two avatars I used in 2019 after that situation happened and they are all fully neutral. Also, now that is Pride Month the game celebrates with rainbow outfits and if you wear it in the game you are really prone to be targeted with homo-transphobic slurs. I'm not sure if it's directly associated with the game itself, in Wolvesville I am a mentor, which means I answer questions in a chat that is inside the game and there used to be a photo feature for players to send. I received a lot of disturbing images ranging from Nazi content to jump-scare videos to images of corpses. I received pictures of naked body parts as well and I was disturbed to receive such comments. Overall I would say it's related to the game because if it didn't offer such a communication channel with us [mentoring volunteers] I would not have seen it. But I would say because I always reached out to the managers to discuss those things that I saw, I

felt supported to not focus on those and move on. But I would say that I did not feel comfortable being exposed to such things and I would like to remark I felt extremely uncomfortable when players made rape jokes. But I feel I am able to not share my feelings with such people, because all they want is attention and a reaction and that's the last thing I want to give them, so I just report them to the managers.

Q8: Can you describe any experiences where your online avatar's gender affected your interactions or experiences in the digital space?

INTERVIEWEE 1: I am usually perceived as a friendly and strict person. I generally don't care about people trolling, I can handle it. Only people close to me can hurt me.

Q9: What changes would you like to see in how online avatars represent gender?

INTERVIEWEE 1: would like more representation. One gender is in the focus of a game usually so I would like more inclusion for female, male and diverse and gender neutral avatars. I think having a more broad choice would be awesome. More than 2 options and the chance to hide it, basically give the option to not have people see your gender and the choice not to see other people's gender if you're not really interested in that. Because I feel in some games, it is an important part of the game to see people's gender, but in others it is just not, so, I guess options to please everyone would be cool.

Interview 2

INTERVIEWEE 2 (23, European, Italian-Nigerian, Bisexual, Cis, Female)

[Accepted GDPR privacy statement]

D1: Che livello di personalizzazione dell'avatar offrono i videogiochi a cui giochi più spesso?

INTERVIEWEE 2: Sì, allora, premesso che io giocavo soprattutto tra i 10 e i 19 anni, forse tra gli 8 e i 19 anni, non potevo proprio scegliere di personalizzare il personaggio, cioè era già impostato, mettiamola così, per esempio giocando a Pokemon, Grand Theft Auto, Assassin's Creed, tutti questi giochi, ma anche Mario Kart e anche i giochi Nintendo, non potevi scegliere come personalizzare il tuo personaggio quindi nel mio caso si traduceva che il personaggio, per esempio, era sempre bianco indipendentemente dal fatto che fosse un uomo, una donna... Non direi una figura di genere neutro perché in effetti non l'ho mai vista nei giochi che usavo all'epoca. Una cosa che ricordo è che per alcuni giochi Wii, quelli un po' generici, come quelli in cui si giocava a tennis o a golf, non so se avete idea, dove, dal 2012, credo, forse anche un po'. Diciamo che all'epoca non c'era molta possibilità di avere personaggi che, per esempio, avessero una carnagione scura, o che potessero essere, come dire, né troppo maschili né troppo femminili. ma tra tutti i dispositivi e le piattaforme di gioco che ho usato, la Wii, non ricordo il nome di quei giochi, era l'unica che permetteva di personalizzare i personaggi come Wii Sport.

D2: Qual è la tua opinione sugli avatar che non si riferiscono a un genere specifico?

INTERVIEWEE 2: Quando parliamo di personalizzazione di un avatar parliamo più spesso di generi binari, la maggior parte dei giochi online non offre la possibilità di scegliere la neutralità. Posso pensare che in pochissimi casi, ad esempio in Leagues of Legends, ci siano personaggi totalmente neutri dal punto di vista del genere. Credo che il problema sia che gli sviluppatori di videogiochi non conoscono i generi non binari. Preferirei non avere personaggi totalmente divisi, se si prende un personaggio femminile di solito è stereotipicamente femminile, con il trucco, i capelli lunghi e vestito di rosa. Gli avatar maschili sono magri o molto muscolosi, con colori che tendono al blu e al nero. In sostanza, non c'è una via di mezzo. Voglio scegliere una ragazza che non possa essere totalmente

femminile nei suoi vestiti in modo stereotipato, quindi forse meno stereotipi nei personaggi perché alla fine penso di aver scelto il personaggio maschile perché in pratica, oltre al fatto che era più forte, come in Dragon Ball.

D3: Puoi spiegare come scegli il genere del tuo avatar online nei videogiochi a cui giochi più spesso?

INTERVIEWEE 2: Ricordo tutti quei giochi di combattimento in cui dovevi dare, in pratica, ascolta le volgarità, calci, pugni, calci, quindi dovevi fare chissà cosa. La scelta era molto semplice, nel caso in cui avessi avuto la possibilità di scegliere in un gioco di combattimento, avrei scelto il personaggio maschile perché era il più forte, anche se non era tratto da una serie, Dragon Ball è tratto da un manga, un anime, dove c'è il protagonista, Goku, quindi posso capire che sia più forte. Quindi non c'è stata una vera e propria scelta, mi ricordo che quando avevo 10 anni, con il mio migliore amico, facevamo un gioco in cui prendevamo un personaggio femminile e vedevamo chi era più bravo a usarlo e così via, perché sono due personaggi deboli. [...] Ma, tornando all'argomento precedente, io personalmente, per motivi personali, non ho mai scelto un personaggio femminile anche se sono cis, quindi non mi vedo come un ragazzo.

D4: Come ti senti quando le opzioni di genere per gli avatar online sono limitate alle scelte binarie di maschio e femmina?

INTERVIEWEE 2: Beh, diciamo che non è molto limitato, perché ero ancora abbastanza giovane, quindi diciamo che ha iniziato a influenzarmi verso i 15 anni, quando ho cambiato lo stile di gioco, sono passato da una squadra in cui potevi stare in città, ma avevi la tua squadra, quindi i giochi erano un po' diversi. Quindi mi sento un po' estraneo al mondo perché non ho mai avuto un gioco con un personaggio di colore, uomo o donna che sia,

tranne GTA, dove ci sono afroamericani con le pistole, quindi un classico, molto cliché Americano.

D5: Hai notato differenze nel modo in cui gli avatar maschili e femminili vengono trattati o percepiti online?

INTERVIEWEE 2: Di fatto sì, ma la cosa più interessante è che è una differenza che fanno molto spesso a prescindere dall'Avatar, cioè nel senso che mi è capitato raramente di fare dei giochi online, perché in questo caso comunque devo parlare di giochi online dove posso avere rapporti con altri giocatori, con altri player e raramente con la scelta di un personaggio femminile possono assumere che sei una persona maschile però ti dirò, essendo che quando giocavo con altri giocatori facevo prevalentemente giochi dove, ripeto, avevi comunque un tuo team stavi in una città, per cui per esempio su Grand Case hai già un team fatto tipo da quattro personaggi adesso non so se hanno cambiato le cose perché non ci gioco da tipo due anni e mezzo e poi ci stava la possibilità di fare le scalate tramite una città Io in quel caso non potevano assumere dall'avatar se eri un maschio o una femmina, perché comunque avevi più personaggi. Però nel caso in cui ti assumevano, cioè assumevano che tu fossi stata una ragazza, che tu eri una ragazza, scusami, coi tempi verbali. Il trattamento era palesemente diverso rispetto a quando pensavano che eri un ragazzo. E, ripeto, non penso sia una cosa che abbia a che fare con l'avatar perché io giocavo anche su Telegram su Inventory Bot e Loot Bot e lì non avevo nessun avatar. C'è stato un periodo in cui io avevo la foto oscurata, per cui non potevano capire subito che ero una ragazza. Il più delle volte, quando pensavano che ero un ragazzo, il trattamento rimaneva, non dico formale, però però un piano più neutro, ecco, se tu contattavi anche i giocatori perché dovevi fare degli scambi, dovevi acquistare degli oggetti ovvia dicendo, contatta il giocatore, si faceva lo scambio, si acquistavano gli oggetti, finito, come dovrebbe essere cioè diventava qualcosa di, come dire, meccanico. Se eri una ragazza tendevano a trattarti particolarmente bene anche quando non chiedevi niente, non so quante cose mi hanno regalato quando giocavo semplicemente perché ero una ragazza

simpatica e quindi ti regalavano le cose, oppure non appena vedevano che non stavi più allo scherzo o no idee di quant'altro, immediatamente ti cominciavano a trattare molto molto molto più male rispetto a come viene trattato un utente bustato maschile quindi un utente che magari sa giocare male, è molto nabbo, però ha un arsenale, ha uno zaino che è particolarmente pieno perché comunque non so le cose se le paga eccetera eccetera in determinati livelli nelle classifiche, nelle globali che fa.

D6: Ti sei mai sentit* sotto pressione a dover scegliere un genere piuttosto che un altro in un gioco online?

INTERVIEWEE 2: Premessa, distinzione, forse te l'avevo anche già fatta, distinzione da quando giocavo in un contesto più internazionale, quindi con giocatori un po' di tutto il mondo, e un contesto totalmente nazionale. Se stavi in un contesto internazionale non più di tanto, perché di fatto giocavo a dei giochi in cui, ripeto, avevi il tuo team e stavi in una gira e quindi per esempio non mi è mai capitato di giocare, non so, a quei giochi dove devi sparare anti i giocatori eccetera, perché in quel caso vedendo anche dei video su youtube ho visto che anche in un contesto internazionale ti conviene far finta di essere un uomo perché di solito ci sta proprio odio del fatto che una donna o comunque una ragazza possa giocare e mediamente parlando possa essere anche più brava di un ragazzo all'interno di un contesto invece nazionale non è stato tanto il genere a dare a darmi fastidio ma il fatto che oltre a sapere che ero una ragazza sapevano che ero nera, per cui mi sono ritrovata tante, tante, tantissime volte a dover, come dire, sviare non solo sul genere, ma proprio sull'etnicità. Quindi, per esempio, tentavo di evitare di far capire che ero nera, di far capire che ero una ragazza e finché non veniva fuori che appunto ero una ragazza, facevo tranquillamente finta di essere un ragazzo, quindi oscuravo l'immagine e facevo intendere agli altri che potevo essere un ragazzo e immediatamente la mia esperienza di gioco è migliorata perché purtroppo sono stata costretta a farlo a seguito del fatto che un utente su una piattaforma dove giocavo aveva preso le mie immagini quindi nemmeno un avatar proprio nei mie

immagini e ci aveva messo sopra un gorilla. Poi nell'ambiente dei videogiochi molto spesso si creano delle situazioni molto tossiche, per cui diventa quasi la normalità fare branco e fare bullismo tra gli utenti. Purtroppo nel mio caso incide molto il fatto che sono nera, quindi l'ho vissuta male, tante volte forse ancora peggio di chi gioca, che è una ragazza ed è bianca. Nel mio caso è inciso oltre il fatto che sono una ragazza il fatto che fossi comunque afrodiscendente.

D7: Puoi raccontarmi di più su questo episodio razzista, o altri episodi di cyberbullismo?

INTERVIEWEE 2: Certo, è un piacere, ma niente ehm... spero di non fare troppo un mischione, perché comunque ho avuto esperienze di gioco sui giochi che sono molto differenti tra di loro eh... però per intenderci, adesso mi racchiudo in uno spazio in cui appunto sei in un classico gioco dove puoi interagire con altri giocatori a prescindere che sia di azione o non azione. E' da livello internazionale secondo me incide prevalentemente il fatto che tu sia una ragazza cioè nel senso che succede rare volte, perlomeno nei giochi che ho giocato io, è successo rare volte. Però può incidere il fatto che siccome sei una ragazza ti sminuiscono perché è un pochettino come avere una donna che guida un aereo oppure una donna che alza un peso maggiore di un uomo, ci sta quasi un' invidia alcune volte per cui tendono a trattarti male semplicemente se raggiungi dei livelli di gioco buoni, hai un buon account, se sai quello che fai, di solito ti trattano male. Però rispetto al contesto nazionale è un po' più mitigato. Quando invece giocava delle cose che venivano limitate a un contesto prettamente italiano, purtroppo nel mio caso è stata un'esperienza su Telegram prevalentemente, eccetto su Grand Case che sono stata anche su una gira d'italiana però il discorso è lo stesso, lì diventava letteralmente una croce. Ripeto, non era tanto il fatto che io fosse una ragazza ma il fatto che fossi nera oltre a essere una ragazza che faceva diventare tutto estenuante. Il caso precedente che ti ho raccontato addirittura è finito con una denuncia, perché nella pratica, per semplice fatto, che è un gioco dove poter fare delle collezioni di alcuni oggetti e facendolo la collezione venivi classificato in una classifica che

potavano avere tutti quanti. Diciamo che io ero messa in una buona posizione, ero tipo tredicesima su più di 15 mila utenti ma perché avevo giocato dall'inizio non perché fossi praticamente brava e ricordo che c'è stato un giocatore che era forse qualche posizione più in alto a me non solo perché si era indispettito e ricordo di essermi svegliata le due di notte con una serie di messaggi che mi avvertivano del fatto che ci stava un ragazzo che faceva circolare la mia foto modificata con sopra un gorilla.

D8: Puoi descrivere qualche esperienza in cui il genere del tuo avatar online ha influenzato le tue interazioni o esperienze online?

INTERVIEWEE 2: Ricordo che avevo contattato un utente per acquistare un oggetto su Lootboot e un'altra volta su Grand Case, che è internazionale. Mi aveva contattato quest'utente e dovevamo fare lo scambio. Non si capiva il mio genere, avevo la foto oscurata o addirittura un personaggio maschile. Inizialmente quando dovevamo discutere dei prezzi la chat andava avanti in maniera molto formale, poi quando hanno capito che ero una ragazza si sono sciolti e sono stati molto più leggeri. Addirittura uno dei due mi ha detto che aveva quittato e mi aveva regalato tantissime cose. Mentre un'esperienza non mia che vedo spesso raccontare, nei giochi dove devi sparare ad altri giocatori non appena scoprivano la voce femminile, nonostante siano giocatrici formidabili, venivano declassate, oppure avevano fatto team con altri giocatori e appena scoprivano che erano ragazze dovevano giocare da sole o gli altri diventavano nemici.

D9: Quali cambiamenti vorresti vedere nel modo in cui gli avatar online vengono rappresentati?

INTERVIEWEE 2: Avrei una lista infinita. Per quanto riguarda l'etnicità di persone afrodiscendenti smettere di far scegliere capelli bianchi per personaggi afro. Vorrei poterlo fare con coerenza, fatta eccezione per i capelli colorati blu verdi etc. Per quanto riguarda il

genere smetterla di fare personaggi femminili che hanno una vita super sottile, fianchi grandissimi senza filo di grasso, la quarta di seno etc. Se vogliamo dare la possibilità di customizzare un personaggio femminile non scegliamo la possibilità di un solo modello di corpo. Discorso che si può fare anche per gli avatar maschili. Corpo femminile uguale al classico concetto di corpo pornografico. I vestiti poi, in alcuni videogiochi se sei un maschio hai un set di vestiti da cui puoi scegliere solo abiti maschili come se non si potessero interscambiare i vestiti. Se io scelgo un personaggio femminile vorrei essere libera di scegliere outfit maschili. Gradirei non potermi ritrovare a scegliere un personaggio femminile e non poterle mettere i pantaloni.

Interview 3

INTERVIEWEE 3 (21, European, Caucasian, Asexual, Trans*, Non-binary genderfluid)

[Accepted GDPR privacy statement]

D1: Che livello di personalizzazione dell'avatar offrono i videogiochi a cui giochi più spesso?

INTERVIEWEE 3: Di solito un basso livello di customizzazione. Di recente ho giocato a Sea Of Thieves e non c'è customizzazione non binaria e comunque devo scegliere qualcos'altro. Wolvesville [WoV] è l'unico gioco a cui gioco con un alto livello di customizzazione. Mi sento abbastanza rappresentat* e posso esprimere la mia identità tramite la customizzazione del personaggio.

D2: Qual è la tua opinione sugli avatar che non si riferiscono a un genere specifico?

INTERVIEWEE 3: Credo che sia un'esperienza più immersiva perché si riferiscono a te come persone, la parte importante del gioco non si focalizza sul tuo genere, ma su te come persona.

Se ci fosse un gioco che desse la possibilità di avere una customizzazione non binaria comunque sarebbe più immersiva. Poi se c'è la scelta di poterlo cambiare in futuro meglio, e anche il fatto che all'inizio il mio genere non venga presupposto dal gioco o comunque se mi viene assegnato un genere preferisco non venga specificato. Dipende anche dal gioco se è a scelte o è un gioco online. Gli NPC ti parlano usando il genere che scegli e avere quello sempre sarebbe bello.

D3: Puoi spiegare come scegli il genere del tuo avatar online nei videogiochi a cui giochi più spesso?

INTERVIEWEE 3: In alcuni giochi preferivo scegliere l'opzione maschile perché scegliendo l'opzione femminile so che c'è da tenere in conto che ricevi commenti a riguardo. In altre situazioni scegliere l'opzione femminile era quello più vicino a quello che mi sentivo in quel momento. È in base a come gli altri ti percepiscono e quindi devi scegliere se vuoi farti percepire in questo modo o in quest'altro, appunto il mio genere non è sempre lo stesso. So che non rispecchia appieno me perché ne preferirei una nonbinary. Se ad esempio su Sea Of Thieves non c'è un'opzione di scegliere un personaggio NB ma solo maschio/femina cerco di scegliere l'avatar che mi sembra più androgino e che io possa personalizzare in seguito. Faccio questa scelta perché è così che voglio esprimermi e perché è così che voglio che gli altri mi vedono. In WoV poiché ho più scelta riesco a esprimere più nel dettaglio come mi sento in base al mio genere in quel momento. Nel mio particolare caso sono genderfluid e scelgo un avatar in base al genere in cui mi sento in quel momento, perché so che stando in una partita voglio che gli altri si riferiscano a me con quel genere.

D4: Come ti senti quando le opzioni di genere per gli avatar online sono limitate alle scelte binarie di maschio e femmina?

INTERVIEWEE 3: Inizio a pensare quale sia l'influenza del genere della skin come influenza il gioco e se non lo influenza la scelta è solo limitante. Dal punto di vista di design del gioco avere una terza opzione sarebbe meglio. Non so perché non venga fatto nonostante il tempo che passa, intendo dire, nonostante la comunità lgbt prova a farsi sentire comunque escono nuovi giochi che non contemplano una terza scelta, resta spesso quella binaria. Se fai un gioco ti dovresti interessare dell'esperienza del giocatore!

D5: Hai notato differenze nel modo in cui gli avatar maschili e femminili vengono trattati o percepiti online?

INTERVIEWEE 3: Questa cosa la vedevo più in Minecraft che appunto non c'è la possibilità di personalizzare, ma appena dici di essere una femmina, cambia drasticamente come si comportano gli altri, cioè ti aiutano o ti insultano. È una differenza percepibile e c'è lo stereotipo che le ragazze giochino peggio o che non sai giocare, tipo "okay, ti aiuto". Non è la stessa cosa se dici di essere maschio. Non capisco perché le persone si comportino in questo modo. A LOL [League of Legends] se dici di essere donna gli insulti improvvisamente cessano. In diversi giochi c'è un diverso comportamento dei giocatori.

D6: Ti sei mai sentit* sotto pressione a dover scegliere un genere piuttosto che un altro in un gioco online?

INTERVIEWEE 3: Sì perché in più occasioni a quanto pare è stata rilevante per essere targhttat* es in Minecraft non puoi personalizzare l'avatar, ma il momento in cui dici di non essere un maschio cis improvvisamente la tua esperienza non è valida e non sai giocare. Se un gioco ti rende felice e tu ci giochi e spendi del tempo ed è anche online e giocando con le persone e queste persone ti discriminano per la tua identità non ci resti molto bene. In WoV invece penso che qualsiasi tipo di avatar avessi trovavano un modo per insultarmi sapendo che fossi trans*, anche in base alla mia sessualità o cose del genere.

D7: Hai mai subito episodi di cyberbullismo?

INTERVIEWEE 3: Ci sono state volte in cui ho dovuto smettere di giocare perchè non è una cosa bella. I commenti sono diversi in base al genere che esprimi (per loro o maschio o femmina), per loro la mia sessualità era legata a quello. Una volta in una lobby mi hanno “ucciso” perchè avevo un avatar maschile ma con tratti femminili, mi hanno detto che ero gay e mi hanno buttato fuori.

D8: Puoi descrivere qualche esperienza in cui il genere del tuo avatar online ha influenzato le tue interazioni o esperienze online?

INTERVIEWEE 3: Sì, mi ricordo che su WoV giocavo / parlavo con questa persona che all'inizio pensava fossi di genere maschile e nel momento in cui a distanza di giorni gli ho detto che ero NB ha cambiato il suo atteggiamento e non abbiamo mai più giocato insieme. In minecraft mi ricordo che avevo un account che dividevo con mia sorella e una volta che avevano capito che non eravamo di genere maschile c'erano 4/5 persone che hanno smesso di invitarci. Quei server che hanno la creative online, coi lotti e si stava sempre nel lotto di qualcuno a giocare, dopo questa cosa non abbiamo più potuto giocare insieme perchè hanno smesso di invitarci. Non so la motivazione razionale.

D9: Quali cambiamenti vorresti vedere nel modo in cui gli avatar online vengono rappresentati?

INTERVIEWEE 3: Se c'è customizzazione del personaggio devono poter dare la possibilità di utilizzare gli item di personalizzazione e non assegnargli un genere o l'altro, ma di dare la possibilità al giocatore di scegliere quali preferisce. Se c'è una bassa customizzazione avere una terza scelta oltre il binario è già buono, dal punto di vista della comunità lgbt.

Se scegli l'avatar femminile ci sta dare la possibilità di sbloccare item maschili e viceversa. Al gioco in cui ho giocato di recente [Duskwood], è un gioco di scelte dove è tipo murder mystery dove devi scoprire alcune cose e il genere dell'avatar non influenza tanto la storia però ci sono alcune cose che ti rendono meno partecipe della storia ed è limitante perché dare la possibilità al giocatore di vedere la storia di tutti i personaggi indipendentemente dall'eteronormatività. Se è un social o un gioco che è molto basato sull'interazione su altri giocatori tipo come Wolvesville, dare la possibilità di un terzo genere che non sia soltanto l'opzione "altro" cioè non specificato. Fa differenza usare la terminologia corretta. Fare in modo che la storia sia accessibile indipendentemente da quello che scegli. So che l'esempio di WoV è specifico però appunto se chi crea i giochi si interessa dell'esperienza del giocatore fare una cosa tipo "sei tu il protagonista" va bene quello che ho detto prima, mentre se è online dare la terza scelta è già tanto. Non serve tanto. Penso che chi crea giochi pensa alle persone come un gruppo a cui mirare, mettere opzione non binary o dare la possibilità di scrivere il proprio genere. Per la customizzazione fare in modo che il giocatore si senta rappresentato.

Interview 4

INTERVIEWEE 4 (22, European, Caucasian, Heterosexual, Cis, Male)

[Accepted GDPR privacy statement]

D1: Che livello di personalizzazione dell'avatar offrono i videogiochi a cui giochi più spesso?

INTERVIEWEE 4: Di solito alto.

D2: Qual è la tua opinione sugli avatar che non si riferiscono a un genere specifico?

INTERVIEWEE 4: Non mi baso molto sul genere dell'avatar che uso, a me interessa di più il gameplay.

D3: Puoi spiegare come scegli il genere del tuo avatar online nei videogiochi a cui giochi più spesso?

INTERVIEWEE 4: A Valorant ci gioco spesso e il genere è legato all'abilità. In altri giochi es WoV [Wolvesville] uso quello che mi rappresenta meglio o mi piace di più esteticamente (genere maschile)

D4: Come ti senti quando le opzioni di genere per gli avatar online sono limitate alle scelte binarie di maschio e femmina?

INTERVIEWEE 4: Indifferente. Di solito nei giochi che gioco io non c'è una scelta, ma se vuoi giocare con certe abilità devi prendere un certo personaggio. Esempio, in Valorant, diversi personaggi hanno avatar diversi e ognuno ha un'abilità specifica. Non c'è disparità di forza perché bene o male hanno tutti abilità legate a come si gioca.

D5: Hai notato differenze nel modo in cui gli avatar maschili e femminili vengono trattati o percepiti online?

INTERVIEWEE 4: Sì, avojo. La maggior parte dei giocatori maschili quando vedono una giocatrice (che nei giochi di sparattutto è raro) diventano simp, le regalano le armi etc. Sono giochi di abilità, se uno non è bravo glielo dici, ma a una ragazza evitano di dirlo o le dicono che può migliorare.

D6: Ti sei mai sentit* sotto pressione a dover scegliere un genere piuttosto che un altro in un gioco online?

INTERVIEWEE 4: Direi di sì perché in un gioco vecchio (e prime versioni di fortnite) le skin femminili avevano le hitbox più piccole e quindi erano più avvantaggiate.

D7: Hai mai subito episodi di cyberbullismo? Puoi descrivere l'esperienza?

INTERVIEWEE 4: Sì, ho ricevuto insulti, soprattutto nei giochi soprattutto capita spesso insulti tra i due team o tra il team stesso. Per qualsiasi ragione. Mi hanno insultato perché sono del sud. Nessun caso mi ha particolarmente scosso: sono abituato a ricevere insulti, con altri giocatori italiani perché sono del sud, se no con quelli internazionali per come si gioca (nabbo, scarso). Stranamente ho ricevuto insulti razziali sia usando skin bianche che nere.

D8: Può descrivere qualche esperienza in cui il genere del tuo avatar online ha influenzato le tue interazioni o esperienze online?

INTERVIEWEE 4: Quasi sempre. Se vedono che sei femmina ti trattano meglio. Questo quando hai la chat vocale. Noi maschi ci capita spesso di insultarci ma non in modo offensivo, una sorta di espressione d'affetto. Se la ragazza ci sta e non gli da fastidio viene inclusa in questi insulti scherzosi.

D9: Quali cambiamenti vorresti vedere nel modo in cui gli avatar online vengono rappresentati?

INTERVIEWEE 4: Lascerei spazio al range più possibile, esempio, per il colore della pelle farei in modo che si potesse scegliere con un codice tipo HEX code, quindi le variazioni di colore sono minime. Per il genere farei come fa Wov gli avatar di base sono gli stessi, se scegli maschio o femmina la base non cambia, quindi la skin base è uguale per tutti. Dipende dal gioco ma sarebbe bello (se rilevante quindi se si vede l'avatar completo) poter da lì customizzare altezza e peso.

Interview 5

INTERVIEWEE 5 (26, European, Caucasian, Queer, Trans*, Male)

[Accepted GDPR privacy statement]

D1: Che livello di personalizzazione dell'avatar offrono i videogiochi a cui giochi più spesso?

INTERVIEWEE 5: Tendenzialmente non troppo ampia. Il gioco a cui gioco più spesso propone degli avatar già creati a cui puoi eventualmente aggiungere piccoli elementi. Da più piccolo giocavo però a The Sims, dove il grado di personalizzazione è fondamentale. Quindi direi che la personalizzazione varia in base ai giochi che utilizzo.

D2: Qual è la tua opinione sugli avatar che non si riferiscono a un genere specifico?

INTERVIEWEE 5: Mi piacciono. Non penso che il genere debba essere la principale caratteristica identificativa di una persona.

D3: Puoi spiegare come scegli il genere del tuo avatar online nei videogiochi a cui giochi più spesso?

INTERVIEWEE 5: Di solito li scelgo in base al mio gusto e cerco di usare avatar con sembianze non umane. Prima dell'inizio del trattamento ormonale sostitutivo mi son reso conto che avevo maggiore difficoltà a scegliere avatar con caratteristiche stereotipicamente riconducibili al genere binario femminile. Non saprei definire la sensazione, era una sorta di disagio probabilmente dovuto al fatto che la mia identità era ancora poco percettibile per le

persone che mi circondavano e, di conseguenza, almeno online mi piaceva definirmi e utilizzare il genere in cui mi rispecchio maggiormente, fisicamente parlando. Usare un avatar femminile mi portava a pensare di star negando la mia identità in un certo senso. Però da quando ho cominciato il trattamento ormonale la cosa è radicalmente cambiata, probabilmente perché sono cambiato anche io. Ora non ho problemi a utilizzare avatar femminili perché non ho bisogno di confermare la mia identità.

D4: Come ti senti quando le opzioni di genere per gli avatar online sono limitate alle scelte binarie di maschio e femmina?

INTERVIEWEE 5: Dispiaciuto ma non sorpreso. Vivendo in un mondo prettamente binario la scelta maschio/femmina è quasi inevitabile. Ciò non toglie che le cose devono cambiare, ovviamente.

D5: Hai notato differenze nel modo in cui gli avatar maschili e femminili vengono trattati o percepiti online?

INTERVIEWEE 5: Non giocando a giochi per cui c'è una vera e propria comunicazione tra utenti non saprei rispondere a questa domanda.

D6: Ti sei mai sentit* sotto pressione a dover scegliere un genere piuttosto che un altro in un gioco online?

INTERVIEWEE 5: Parlando sempre di giochi (ma non online) ricordo che la pressione di dover scegliere il genere è sempre stata molto presente nella mia vita, anche durante l'infanzia. Ricordo che per un gioco che avevo per il Nintendo mi ero creato un avatar maschile e avevo giocato a lungo. Ricordo benissimo quando una persona mi chiese di giocare a quel gioco e, per non mostrare l'avatar, decisi di cancellare tutti i miei dati. Provavo

vergogna ma non sapevo dare una motivazione. L'unica cosa che ricordo è che mi sentivo semplicemente fuori luogo e quasi nei guai. Come se scegliere un avatar maschile avrebbe comportato una punizione se qualcuno l'avesse scoperto.

D7: Hai mai subito episodi di cyberbullismo? Puoi descrivere l'esperienza?

INTERVIEWEE 5: Onestamente no, a motivo del fatto che non gioco e non mi piacciono i giochi online in cui ci si deve relazionare con altre persone.

D8: Puoi descrivere qualche esperienza in cui il genere del tuo avatar online ha influenzato le tue interazioni o esperienze online?

INTERVIEWEE 5: Risposta 7 risponde a questo, dato che non gioco online.

D9: Quali cambiamenti vorresti vedere nel modo in cui gli avatar online vengono rappresentati?

INTERVIEWEE 5: Come nella vita quotidiana, vorrei un mondo online in cui il genere non sia la base dell'identità. Vorrei corpi non conformi, cicatrici, segni della vecchiaia, identità che vadano oltre il genere inteso come mera conseguenza del sesso anatomico.

Preferirei più possibilità e meno corpi normati. Non mi piacerebbe il totale appiattimento delle differenze, vorrei più differenze in modo da rappresentare il maggior numero di corpi.