More Gamer, Less Girl: Gendered Boundaries, Tokenism, and the Cultural Persistence of Masculine Dominance

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How do exclusionary boundaries persist in consumption subcultures amid increased progress, representation, and inclusion? In video gaming, women have come to represent nearly half of the market; yet, this is a limited indicator of gender-based progress. A culture of masculine dominance persists. Extending previous research on boundary work, the authors employ a cultural perspective of tokenism to examine how gendered boundaries in consumption subcultures persist despite efforts to transform or even eradicate them. This qualitative study draws on interviews with 23 gamers who identify as women (ages 19–29 years), coupled with data from social media platforms, news media, and industry reports. Empirical findings capture the recursive process of *maladaptive boundary crossing*: how women's efforts to subvert gendered boundaries at the micro level (e.g., through response enactments) get churned through the structuring tokenistic mechanics of boundary work at the meso level and result in the inadvertent cultural persistence of masculine dominance. The analysis offers a conceptual framework that explains how micro–meso level dynamics perpetuate and conceal inequity in consumption subcultures. Implications address the precarious promise of progress and the cultural legacy of tokenism in the marketplace with particular relevance to broader systems of domination.

Keywords: consumption subculture, video gaming, gender inequity, boundary work, tokenism, masculine dominance

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Editors: Linda L. Price and Markus Giesler

Associate Editor: Zeynep Arsel

Advance Access publication 3 October 2022

In March of 2019, Chiquita Evans became the first woman drafted into the *NBA 2K* League, the premier professional video gaming league co-organized by the National Basketball Association. Fellow *NBA 2K* gamers complimented Evans's boundary-breaking achievement but with caveats. "She has (high) basketball IQ for a girl," said one gamer. "Most people would be like, 'I'm playing with a girl. She's not going to know what to do.' She knows what she's doing. You can tell." The she-is-good-for-a-girl descriptor signals deeply rooted gendered structures that underlie gaming. Indeed, Evans reports experiencing gender-based harassment from fellow gamers. "I've had sexual remarks put toward me," she said. "I get told I should be back in the kitchen. '*2K* is not for women,' I've had that. There's no question about that" (Associated Press 2019). It is not Evans's skillset or knowledge that makes her unique among her fellow players; it is her gendered position of being a woman in gaming.

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https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucac046

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Statistics suggest that women are actively engaged in video games (e.g., 48% of nearly 215 million American gamers identify as women; Entertainment Software Association 2022); yet, the gaming subculture is still largely considered "a man's world." It is "centered on men, targets men, and is dominated by male perspectives" (Gray, Buyukozturk, and Hill 2017, 2). Despite decades of social movements, women continue to face barriers to entry and experience gender inequity in subcultures coded as masculine (Htun and Weldon 2018). In gaming, some might expect that accruing high scores, improving gameplay, and adopting masculine norms could enable individual women to gain status and navigate the social hierarchy in gaming (Bourdieu 2001). But this suggests that crossing gendered boundaries is a function of personal preference and individual behaviors without questioning the "systems through which [women's] bodies were excluded in the first place" (Vossen 2018, 207). What remains to be articulated is how gendered boundaries in consumption subcultures persist despite individual efforts to transform or even eradicate them.

Prior research establishes that gendered boundaries exist in consumption subcultures (Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013; Martin, Schouten, and McAlexander 2006; Sherry et al. 2004; Thompson and Üstüner 2015) but tends to undertheorize the relationship between individual experiences of women and meso-level structures of masculine dominance (Ridgeway 2011). Meso-level structures represent an intermediate unit of analysis (Akaka, Schau, and Vargo 2022; Serpa and Ferreira 2019) between minimum (micro) and maximum (macro) extremes. Analysis of meso-level structures focuses on how groups "provide mechanisms through which individuals fit into larger structures and through which social structures shape individuals" (Fine 2012, 4.1). This approach explores how socially constructed boundaries intersect with identity, social capital, and group culture by connecting micro-level interactions with meso-level structures. Such micro–meso relationships are embedded within macro-level social frames, such as the institutional logic of misogyny (Manne 2017) which complicates gendered boundaries. Extending previous research on boundary work (Arsel and Thompson 2011; Dolbec and Fischer 2015; Lamont and Molnár 2002; Weinberger 2015), we focus on micro–meso dynamics to explore gendered boundaries and the cultural persistence of masculine dominance in consumption subcultures. Specific to our context, we ask: How do gendered boundaries persist in gaming, despite increased engagement, representation, and progress among women in the consumption subculture?

Two caveats must be addressed from the outset. First, in addressing gendered boundaries, we utilize gender binary language which is rooted in a false division of mutually exclusive gendered categories (e.g., men versus women). This inaccurate dichotomy ignores gender fluidity and non-binary possibilities; however, as Manne (2017) suggests, the "logic of patriarchy, hence misogyny, very much includes a commitment to gender binarism" and adopting such falsehoods "can be useful to understand the inner workings of a system that upholds the status quo. . .in order to see how best to combat it" (27). Second, to that end, the specific type of masculine dominance we are exploring is marked by systemic patriarchal and misogynistic parameters, colloquially referred to as toxic masculinity. This form of masculine dominance is characterized by deriding all others who do not fit a particular mode of the ideal man (e.g., white, middle-class, heterosexual, Western, able-bodied); it "functions to enforce and police women's subordination and to uphold male dominance, against the backdrop of other intersecting systems of oppression and vulnerability" (Manne 2017, xiv). Taken together, our study seeks to understand what this extreme type of masculine dominance does to women and its consequences for gendered boundaries while recognizing any adverse consequences are disproportionately harmful relative to parallel systems of dominance (e.g., racism, homophobia, transphobia).

To explain the dynamics of gendered boundaries within consumption subcultures, we put forth a cultural perspective of tokenism as a conceptual lens to explore the processes by which gendered boundaries are perpetuated and concealed, despite women's efforts to jettison masculine dominance in the gaming subculture. Tokenism is a powerful conceptual lens because it focuses attention on how exclusion can disguise itself as inclusion (Holgersson and Romani 2020). Previous research suggests that boundaries can be crossed through social mobility (e.g., status acquisition or gendered performances; Bourdieu 2001). In contrast, tokenism suggests such social mobility is deceptive: the permeability of boundaries is fraught with structural constraints. Our empirical findings identify three structuring tokenistic mechanics of boundary work: weaponizing a collective consumer identity, advancing meritocracy myths, and enforcing cultural gatekeeping contingencies. In turn, women employ five response enactments to navigate gendered boundaries: self-policing, reprimanding, grandstanding, withdrawing, and acquiescing. The relationship between the tokenistic mechanics of boundary work (meso level) and response enactments (micro level) is conceptualized as a recursive process we term *maladaptive boundary crossing*. Maladaptive boundary crossing marries micro and meso levels of consumer culture to show how individual response enactments get churned through the structuring tokenistic mechanics of boundary work and are inadvertently used to support the cultural persistence of masculine dominance. That is, maladaptive boundary crossing suggests boundaries seem behaviorally permeable without acknowledging the static nature of a marginalized identity status in reproducing inequity. Our analysis holds implications for understanding why the so-called progress

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is precarious in shifting gendered boundaries and how the cultural legacy of tokenism is embedded in the marketplace, with implications for exploring similar systems of domination.

Our article is structured as follows: we begin by conceptualizing gendered boundaries; next, we outline key elements of tokenism as a conceptual lens. We then discuss the context for our study: women's experiences in the video gaming subculture. After we describe the methodology, we present our conceptual framework, as illustrated through our findings. Finally, we discuss implications of the research and future directions.

CONCEPTUALIZING GENDERED BOUNDARIES

The process of defining, negotiating, and performing identity-based boundaries is known as boundary work (Lamont and Molnár 2002). By generating feelings of similarity and difference, boundary work offers opportunities for identification, membership, status, and access to resources. That is, boundaries act as culturally constructed lines to establish what—or who—lies inside or outside of a subculture (Lamont, Pendergrass, and Pachucki 2015). Social theory related to identity-based boundary work examines the relative salience of boundaries (e.g., moral, cultural, socioeconomic) and their properties (e.g., permeability, visibility, brightness; Lamont 2012).

Theory on boundary work emerged as a comparative perspective to Bourdieu's (1977) suggestions that acquiring cultural capital can enable individuals to gain status and overcome social inequity. This view is not incorrect, just incomplete. Bourdieu's conceptualization suggests boundaries can be crossed through the "right" behaviors, knowledge, skills, and abilities in a clear social hierarchy. But that is an exclusionary practice that makes boundaries seem behaviorally permeable without acknowledging the privilege of defining what is "right." Lamont (1992) suggests that inequity is reproduced through identity-based boundaries by establishing often murky grounds for social exclusion between "us" and "them," evident in fragmented subgroups of stigmatized consumers (Eichert and Luedicke 2022). In directing attention to boundary work, the focus of our research is on inclusion and exclusion mechanisms, which could be veiled and ultimately never fully permeable.

Boundary work involves identifying a particular ideal and negotiating its surrounding boundaries (Lamont and Molnár 2002). For example, fatshionistas—or plus-size fashion influencers—are corporeally demarcated from "mainstream" fashion influencers (Scaraboto and Fischer 2013), and gay men become categorized through subtle shared commercial interests (Kates 2002). Gender acts as a common mechanism for constructing such idealized identity-based boundaries in consumption subcultures (Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013; Sandikci and Ger 2010; Sherry et al. 2004), resulting in gendered boundaries. Prior research primarily analyzes gendered boundaries through Bourdieuian perspectives of status competition and cultural capital (Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013; Holt and Thompson 2004; Thompson and Üstüner 2015). This focuses scholarly attention on individuals' strategies for navigating such boundaries by performing masculinities and femininities. For example, roller derby girls engage in feminine but tough gender performance to carve out their own separate but homogeneous space for liberation (Thompson and Üstüner 2015); at-home fathers use capitalizing consumption practices to shed gendered stigmas and reclaim masculinity in the domestic feminine domain (Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013); and women who ride motorcycles co-opt masculine behaviors to redefine personal femininities and combat inequity (Martin et al. 2006).

While such research is valuable for explaining individual gender performances, it risks obfuscating the structuring mechanics of gendered boundaries, against a backdrop of masculine dominance (Adkins and Skeggs 2004). The goal of our research is to interrogate the micro–meso relationship by which gendered boundaries are structured within a consumption subculture of masculine dominance and the implications for gender equity as women attempt to cross these boundaries. To rethink and expand our understanding of gendered boundaries within the marketplace, theoretical attention must shift to delineate the cultural embeddedness of gender inequity. We suggest that tokenism is a useful conceptual lens to capture such complexities.

A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE OF TOKENISM AS A CONCEPTUAL LENS

Tokenism is defined as a pattern of activity meant to foster the illusion of inclusivity within social systems where a dominant group is pressured to share resources (e.g., privilege, power, commodities) with a historically excluded group (Kanter 1977; Laws 1975). It restricts both the quality and quantity of social mobility, whereby the token "is a member of an underrepresented group, who is operating on the turf of the dominant group, under license from it" (Laws 1975, 51). The dynamics of tokenism are most evident when the marginalized identity of a tokenized individual seems visibly obvious (e.g., gender, race; Watkins, Simmons, and Umphress 2019). Tokenized individuals are often evaluated under different, more stringent standards and reminded of their lower status, as evident in women's experiences in hyper-masculine consumption subcultures such as motorcycling (Martin et al. 2006). Women with legitimate credentials are allowed entry but are tagged as

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outsiders and relegated to the role of "token women"—as long as they agree to play by the rules set by the dominant group. Thus, tokenism ensures that the marginalized group is tolerated, not assimilated (Yoder 1991).

Modern cultural perspectives of tokenism—collectively dubbed "tokenism revisited"—advocate for using tokenism as a conceptual lens to explore the meso-level structural dynamics by which gendered power is perpetuated and concealed (Holgersson and Romani 2020). When tokenism scholarship emerged (Kanter 1977), it was believed that a numerical critical mass (e.g., quotas) could combat gender inequity, particularly as women increasingly entered workplace settings traditionally dominated by men or perceived as masculine occupations (Yoder, Adams, and Prince 1983). But tokenism research solely based on representation percentages, "without taking into consideration the broader societal context in which these work groups operate" (Yoder 2002, 3), leads to insufficient perspectives on such situations (Santos, Amâncio, and Roux 2015). For instance, when marginalized groups gain numerical representation, they are often viewed as intrusive by the dominant group, resulting in increased harassment and discrimination (Lewis and Simpson 2012). Small numbers of women in men's spaces lay the foundation for tokenism, but as more women enter these spaces and threaten men's access to resources, sexism can increase. The dominant group mobilizes against tokens and propagates stereotypes about them (Kanter 1977). A cultural perspective of tokenism addresses such meso-level structural dynamics—beyond numerical representation—and extends Kanter's (1977) work by adopting the following three behavioral tenets of tokenism: role entrapment, performance pressures, and boundary heightening.

First, *role entrapment* essentializes gendered characteristics in which women's identities and opportunities become bound by gendered stereotypes. Tokenism distorts women's characteristics to fit "preexisting generalizations" and to "force [women] into playing limited and caricatured roles in the system" (Kanter 1977, 980). Across contexts, studies demonstrate how women get pigeonholed: women in sales are mistaken to be secretaries (Kanter 1977); women in construction are assumed to be physically strong "dykes" or boyfriend-seeking "whores" (Paap 2018); and women employed as prison guards are dubbed too friendly or too weak when supervising incarcerated people (Collica-Cox and Shulz 2020). Role entrapment mandates that women can exist in masculine dominant spaces but only as relics or artifacts of gender stereotypes.

Second, due to their visibility, token women experience *performance pressures* such as demands to publicly prove their worth and emphasize their achievements. Under scrutiny, token women feel pressured to either overachieve or seek invisibility. For example, in medicine, women note pressures to prove their competence more than men (Santos et al. 2015). Pressures also manifest in more mundane consumption subcultures such as golf, where "driving distance" becomes a marker of status on the golf course (McGinnis, McQuillan, and Chapple 2005). Women use drive accuracy as compensatory evidence to prove that they belong in golf; yet, they are viewed as "less worthy of being on the course than long-driving but often inaccurate men" (McGinnis et al. 2005, 332). Performance pressures are a function of women being highly visible—or out of the ordinary—in masculine subcultures. Any one woman's failures are used as evidence for why other women do not (or should not) belong in that subculture in the first place (Yoder 1991).

Third, through *boundary heightening*, dominant men exaggerate their own masculine norms—especially in the presence of women—to isolate token women and reinforce the validity of masculine dominant culture (Kanter 1977). Token women are expected to engage in loyalty tests by allowing themselves to become a source of humor (e.g., partaking in misogynistic jokes) and by downplaying gender discrimination or exclusion (Holgersson and Romani 2020). In Kanter's (1977) study of the sales industry, dominated by men, women themselves mocked stereotypical gendered traits (e.g., quitting work to get married). Tokenized individuals either accept being isolated or must continually prove themselves loyal to the dominant masculine culture.

A cultural perspective of tokenism is not just about women being numerically represented in a space dominated by men; it enables exploration of how misogyny and sexism are culturally embedded in gendered boundaries and in consumers' everyday lived experiences of being tokenized (Lewis and Simpson 2012; Yoder 1991). Such perspectives diverge from Kanter's early conceptualization, which assumed that gender was a binary, biological category (Watkins et al. 2019). Modern tokenism theorists assert that gender is not static; yet, it becomes static when coded within the confines of masculine dominance. In the case of video gaming, men are culturally perceived to be the dominant group (Jenson and de Castell 2018). While our study focuses on understanding women, broadly, any identity—outside of the white, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied man—could be perceived as threatening for occupying space in a masculine consumption subculture and differently situated individuals may experience compounding effects of intersecting forms of dominance (e.g., transphobia, racism). In line with Manne (2017), our research aims to understand micro–meso mechanisms of enforcement against a macro-level backdrop of misogyny in gaming—a masculine subculture where women statistically represent nearly half of the market; yet, gendered boundaries persist. Research examines barriers to women entering gaming and why they might leave, but few studies tether their lived experiences to the structural dynamics of a deeply misogynistic gaming subculture (Bergstrom 2019). This leaves open questions about why this

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subculture, despite near gender parity among gamers, remains deeply misogynistic.

CONTEXT: WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES IN THE VIDEO GAMING SUBCULTURE

Video gaming has been dubbed a "particularly masculine pursuit" (Selwyn 2007, 533). In analyzing the historical evolution of gender bias in gaming, Kirkpatrick (2017, 453) writes "gaming was not born sexist but was codified as an exclusively male practice." Early gaming reproduced traditional gender roles, as the first mechanized arcade games largely reflected masculine pastimes such as hunting (e.g., *Duck Hunt*, 1969) and car racing (e.g., *Grand Prix*, 1969). Electronic arcade games followed suit with perceivably masculine content such as war games like *Space Invaders* (1978) and *Battlezone* (1980). In the 1970s and 1980s, arcades became a sanctuary of independence and socialization for adolescents. Young boys played games whereas girls tended to watch from the sidelines (Kaplan and Kaplan 1983). Personal video game consoles and home computers changed the gaming landscape by moving the pastime into domestic spaces. Still, gender bias in video game content and gameplay persisted (Gailey 1993). Early 1980s media discourses interrogated gender exclusivity in gaming, but these voices were engulfed by the emergence of "a community of taste," which socially and culturally mandated that the authentic gamer should be a man (Kirkpatrick 2017, 465). Nineties gaming research suggests that boys played video games more frequently than girls, but both boys and girls showed equal interest in playing them (Gailey 1993). At the turn of the century, adults flocked to online video games (Griffiths, Davies, and Chappell 2003) and the internet ushered in promises of democratization, empowerment, and social community (Cova and Pace 2006). However, video gaming content and marketing continued to be reflected as masculine leisure (Near 2013). Women today represent a growing gamer demographic in the $60.4 billion video gaming industry (Entertainment Software Association 2022); yet, misogyny remains deeply embedded in gaming (Jenson and de Castell 2018).

Misogyny is most prevalent in online multiplayer role-playing games, which are decidedly deemed to be the most masculine (e.g., *Halo, Grand Theft Auto*; Jenson and de Castell 2011) and the most legitimate for "real gamers" (Consalvo and Paul 2019). To cope with harassment, women turn to strategies such as playing only with trusted friends or hiding their gendered identities in gameplay (Cote 2017). These strategies are even more pronounced for women who occupy overlapping marginalized social identities (e.g., racial identities, Gray 2020; gender and sexual identities, Shaw 2015). The gaming subculture reflects a history of misaligned power relations, despite attempts to "fix" gender inequities (Harvey and Fisher 2013). For instance, in 2014, #Gamergate, a violent right-wing attack on more inclusive video game culture, gained headlines with a surge in public threats, harassment, and sexism against women in the gaming community (Braithwaite 2016). In 2021, Activision Blizzard, the video game producer behind top games including *World of Warcraft* and *Call of Duty* faced multiple lawsuits alleging "widespread sexual harassment and a 'frat boy' culture at the company" (Chalk 2021). Gaming is not just dominated by men; it is dominated by white, middle-class, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied men (Gray 2020). To understand how gender inequity persists in gaming, we must investigate women's experiences in the context of gaming's gendered history, as a function of such dominant yet taken-for-granted heteronormative forces. Figure 1 provides a truncated timeline of notable firsts given these are often the cultural linchpins of tokenism.

METHOD

We collected a multi-layered data set to theorize linkages between gendered boundaries and tokenism in the gaming subculture. Data collection began with a phenomenological approach focusing on experiences derived from the contextual environment (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989). We interviewed 23 avid gamers (ages 19–29 years) who self-identify as women. In the gaming subculture, any gamer socially coded as "woman" is placed in a marginalized social position, and women in gaming regularly witness and reflect upon their own lived experiences with gender inequity. In contrast, because men uphold the system's status quo, much of their own role in boundary work is not recognized and goes undetected; this combined with social desirability bias precluded men as participants.

Participants were recruited by the first and second authors via flyers posted at local video game retail stores in three midwestern US cities. On average, interviews lasted between 30 and 75 minutes and were conducted at local coffee shops, at on-campus facilities, or at participants' homes. Interviews began with grand tour questions (McCracken 1988) about personal histories with video games and continued with questions specific to video game consumption experiences (e.g., playing, purchasing). Participants were asked to discuss both positive and negative aspects of their gaming experiences as well as their perspectives about gender representation in advertising and gameplay. Thus, they were not probed to report gender discrimination nor gender inequity exclusively. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed for analysis. The resulting data set included 292 pages of transcription. All participants were assured of individual confidentiality and pseudonyms are used for all participants in this study (table 1).

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FIGURE 1

EVOLUTION OF WOMEN IN GAMING

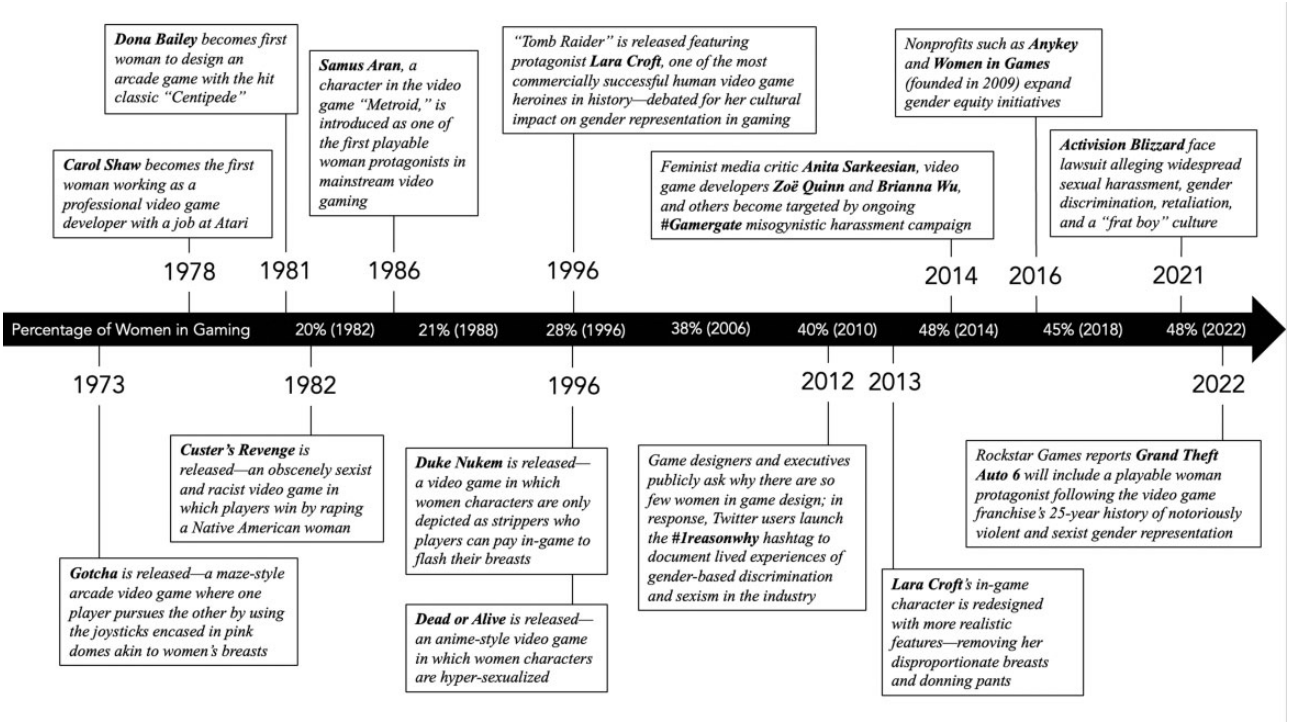


TABLE 1

INFORMANTS AND GAMING PREFERENCES

Pseudonym	Preferred games	Pseudonym	Preferred games
Aisha	*Gauntlet* *Diablo*	Kiara	*League of Legends* *Fallout*
Afton	*Grand Theft Auto* *Call of Duty*	Hannah	*BioShock* *Skyrim*
Paige	*Skyrim* *Fallout*	Jayde	*Call of Duty*
Amber	*Destiny* *Mass Effect*	Heidi	*Call of Duty* *Destiny*
Gina	*World of Warcraft* *Final Fantasy*	Leslie	*Call of Duty* *The Last of Us*
Evie	*Rocket League* *Borderlands*	Vivian	*League of Legends* *Destiny*
Marisa	*Fallout* *Animal Crossing*	Nina	*Call of Duty* *Far Cry*
Lydia	*Mass Effect* *Final Fantasy*	Piper	*Assassin's Creed* *Call of Duty*
Chelsey	*Call of Duty* *Battlefield*	Ruby	*Call of Duty* *Skyrim*
Valerie	*Call of Duty* *Halo*	Zoey	*Pokémon* *Firewatch*
Brandi	*The Legend of Zelda* *Assassin's Creed*	Ivy	*Overwatch* *Grand Theft Auto*
Tara	*Lord of the Rings* *Final Fantasy*		

Of note, a majority of interview participants identify as white, cisgender, heterosexual women in the United States, which represents a distinct and privileged social identity. Thus, the sample is not representative of all women in the gaming subculture. As a result, the types of gender expression and cultural stereotypes portrayed by women in our study are inherently shaped by these boundaries. During the interviews, participants disclosed details of their social identities (i.e., race, ethnicity, age, sexuality, class, able-bodiedness, nationality, neurodivergence); however, such factors were not formally included in the sampling frame. While an intersectional analysis (Crenshaw 2017) lies beyond the scope of this study, we recognize that misogyny has mutually compounding effects on differently situated women (e.g., non-white, transgender, queer; Manne 2017) and is arguably disproportionately more harmful for less-privileged groups. Additional modes of data collection enabled us to better contextualize and triangulate women's experiences in gaming (table 2).

To broaden the sample through digital observational methods (Maciel and Wallendorf 2021), we examined interactions across three distinct social media platforms: Twitch, YouTube, and Reddit. First, Twitch is a live-streaming platform where gamers can broadcast their in-play experiences for an online audience and engage in real-

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TABLE 2:

DATA COLLECTION OVERVIEW

Data collection method	Purpose	Sources
Depth interviews	Understanding women's lived experiences with and perceptions of the gaming subculture	23 in-depth interviews with self-identified women gamers in the Midwestern and West Coastal US (table 1)
Social media observations	Understanding gendered discourses and patterns of practice within the gaming subculture	31 YouTube videos; 20 top Twitch streamers; 2 women-oriented gaming subreddits
Mainstream media coverage	Understanding historical and current media framing of gender and the gaming subculture	Press/trade content from US market: trade coverage (e.g., *PC Gamer*), news articles (e.g., *New York Times*), and docunews (e.g., *High Score*)
Archival advertisements	Understanding commercialized representations of women in the gaming subculture	Ads accessed via AdsoftheWorld, Google Arts & Culture, and Strong's International Center for the History of Electronic Games
Industry reports	Understanding industry trends and initiatives toward gender equity in the gaming subculture	Social impact and diversity reports from eight of the top video game distributors (e.g., Nintendo, Activision Blizzard, Electronic Arts)

time chats. Observing Twitch livestreams provided a live look into women's gaming experience without researcher interference. We observed streaming content from the top 20 women Twitch streamers (e.g., KittyPlaysGames, Pokimane), according to Mediakix and Influencer Marketing Hub, and documented fieldnotes. These women are highly visible in the subculture of gaming, with an average of 1.3 million followers each. Second, we turned to YouTube to capture publicly shared narratives related to women in gaming (Pace 2008). Using the search terms "gamer girls" and "women in gaming," we assembled a data set of 31 videos across 14 unique channels resulting in 7.5 hours of YouTube video content with an average length of 14:20 minutes per video. These videos were added to a private playlist via YouTube and shared between the coauthors for viewing. Third, we documented online conversations via Reddit, a social news aggregation and discussion site. Reddit allows users to form niche communities organized by topic or subreddits. We analyzed posts in two relevant subreddits: r/GirlGamers (148k members; "A place for gamers who also happen to be women, probably") and r/GamerGirl (4k members; "A space for girl gamers in the gaming community"). We reviewed Reddit threads in which gendered experiences are foregrounded as captured via Google Sheets Reddit Scraper.

To situate the sociocultural context of women's experiences in gaming and the historical evolution of this subculture, we gathered archival data from mainstream news media, video game advertisements, and industry reports. Archival mainstream media were collected from Factiva, a news database featuring mainstream outlets (e.g., the *New York Times*, *USAToday*) and localized publications. We used "gamer girl" and "women in gaming" as primary search terms. Popular gaming magazines and video documentaries were also reviewed spanning four decades (i.e., 1980–2020). Commercialized representations of women in gaming were captured via AdsoftheWorld's "gaming" category, Google Arts & Culture's "A Brief History of Women in Gaming," and Strong's International Center for the History of Electronic Games. Last, we reviewed the social impact and diversity reports from eight of the world's top video game distributors (e.g., Nintendo, Activision Blizzard, Ubisoft, and Epic Games).

Our analysis was rooted in a tradition of consumer culture theory, which conceptualizes culture as the very fabric of experience, meaning, and action (Arnould and Thompson 2005). Data analysis included the use of phenomenological procedures advanced by Colaizzi (1978) and modified by Veresiu and Giesler (2018), which consisted of tacking back and forth between each data point, potential explanatory theories, and the three authors' theoretical interpretations until emergent themes were refined and developed. Using tokenism as a conceptual lens (e.g., role entrapment, performance pressures, boundary heightening), we carefully examined and compared participants' interviews and supporting data. This was followed by cross-checking and theme refinement (Creswell and Poth 2016) with the focus on the cultural persistence of masculine dominance as described by participants. Specifically, we scrutinized the initial interpretations and introduced complementary or alternative readings. Negative cases were also carefully considered during theory building.

FINDINGS

Our data show how the structuring patterns intrinsic to tokenism (e.g., role entrapment, performance pressures, boundary heightening) enable what we term the *tokenistic mechanics of boundary work*. Given tokenism's role in erecting and maintaining gendered boundaries, we identify women's response enactments used to cross gendered boundaries in gaming and illustrate how such efforts are

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co-opted to inadvertently support the cultural persistence of masculine dominance. We conceptualize the relationship between the tokenistic mechanics of boundary work and response enactments as a recursive process called *maladaptive boundary crossing*, wherein the micro-level response enactments aimed toward crossing gendered boundaries inadvertently contribute to their meso-level presence. This recursive process between micro–meso levels enables the macro-level cultural persistence of masculine dominance while disguising itself as boundary-breaking progress. Figure 2 offers an organizing framework.

The upper half of figure 2 illustrates how meso-level gendered boundaries are structured in the gaming subculture through three tokenistic mechanics of boundary work: weaponizing a collective consumer identity, advancing meritocracy myths, and enforcing cultural gatekeeping contingencies. These structuring tokenistic mechanics of boundary work operate in tandem to culturally establish masculine dominance in everyday gaming experiences. The lower half of figure 2 captures women's micro-level response enactments (e.g., self-policing, reprimanding, grandstanding, withdrawing, acquiescing) used to cross gendered boundaries and navigate masculine dominance. However, because the subculture is rooted in tokenism, these response enactments get churned through the tokenistic mechanics of boundary work and result in unintentionally reproducing masculine dominance and thus the recursive process of maladaptive boundary crossing. The term maladaptive, by definition, means not providing adequate or complete adjustment to the environment or situation (Oxford Languages 2022). This is not a reflection of any shortcomings in women's micro-level response enactments per se. Rather, it is meant to redirect attention to how meso-level structuring tokenistic mechanics of boundary work, embedded in the subculture, constrain women's ability to cross gendered boundaries. Thus, maladaptive boundary crossing represents a micro–meso relationship that captures the complex implications response enactments have in terms of both combating and upholding masculine dominance. Response enactments are not wholly ineffective in creating strides toward equity but our data suggest that they are inherently tethered to a structured system designed to reinforce the dominant group's power and control. The following sections describe and illustrate each element of our conceptual model.

The Tokenistic Mechanics of Boundary Work

The tokenistic mechanics of boundary work structure the meso-level gendered boundaries in gaming, enabled by patterns intrinsic to tokenism. First, role entrapment enables weaponizing a collective consumer identity. Second, performance pressures enable advancing meritocracy myths. Third, boundary heightening enables enforcing cultural gatekeeping contingencies. Here, we highlight women's experiences of being tokenized as the dominant group, men, use the tokenistic mechanics of boundary work to establish "us" and "them" ideals.

Weaponizing a Collective Consumer Identity. Previous research suggests that collective consumer identity can be empowering (Thomas, Price, and Schau 2013). In contrast, our study finds that the collective consumer identity of "gamer girl" is negatively imposed upon women to foster gendered exclusion. This constitutes the tokenistic mechanic of weaponizing a collective consumer identity, enabled by role entrapment and exemplified by stereotyping and sexualizing. In our data, men are by default considered "real gamers," reflecting the masculine nature of the subculture, whereas women are derogatively stereotyped as "gamer girls." Chelsey explains:

> It is almost a negative connotation because just because I am a female does not mean I am a gamer, you know? I think gamers should just be gamers, whether they are a guy or a girl. You hear the term female gamer or gamer girl, and it's almost, not really mocking, but kind of like we're not taken seriously. We have to be separated from real gamers.

Chelsey's comments suggest that women's lived bodies are perceived as deceitful and inauthentic—merely pretending to be gamers and viewed as imposters. Rhetorically separating "real gamers" from "gamer girls" acts as a form of role entrapment, in line with tokenism (Laws 1975). Weaponizing a collective consumer identity signals that women can, ostensibly, be gamers while repeatedly reminding them of their subordinate status. As another gamer, Ivy, says, "Imagine doing something that you like to do, but people are trying to not associate you with that. It is strictly geared toward a specific gender." Her frustration extends from a mismatch between her self-identity and the identity others assign to her, based on socially constructed cultural scripts, norms, and expectations of gender (Lorber 1994).

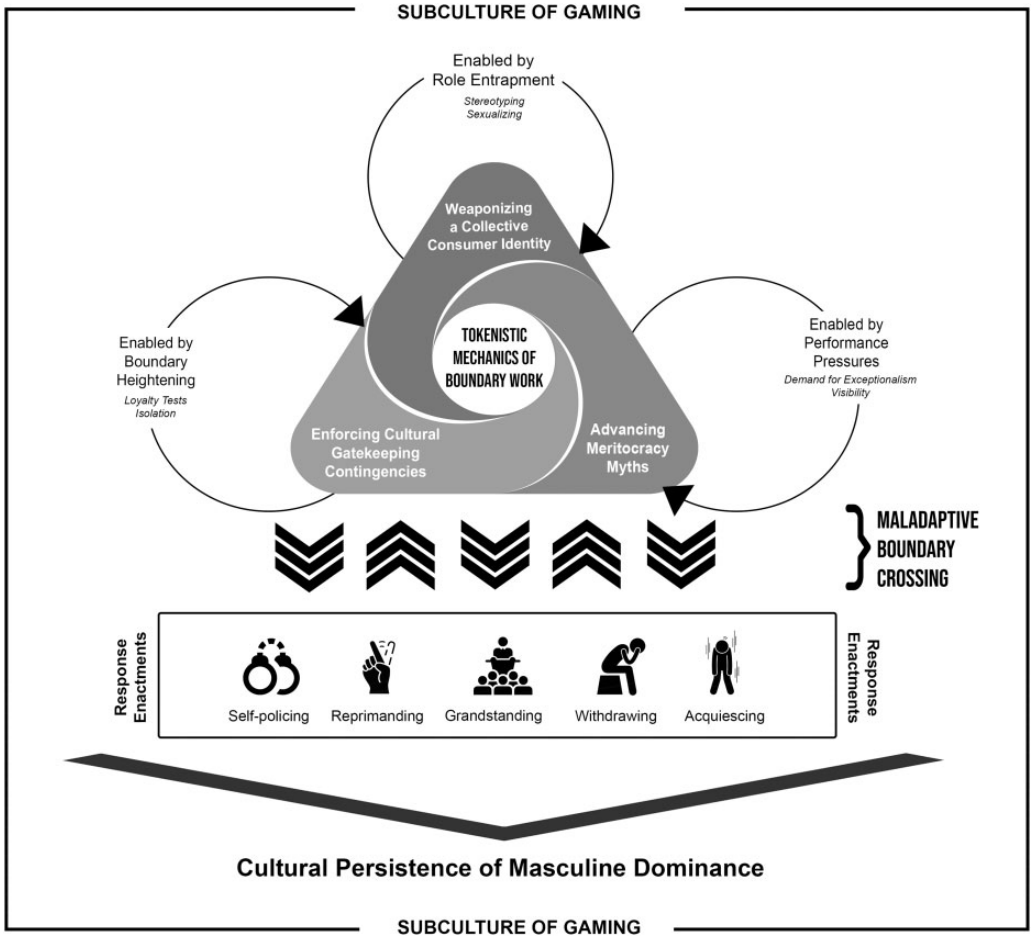
Women are subjected to contextual stereotypes and gendered tropes. For instance, Amber posits that "people would like to assume that girls only play girly games, like games where you take care of children or they only like pink or purple controllers." Such assumptions directly contribute to the gendered premise of "real gamers" and a narrowly defined gender stereotype based on video games themselves. Paige suggests playing "RPGs [roleplay games] like *Skyrim* and *Fallout 4*" and "first-person shooters like *Call of Duty* and *Modern Warfare*" are associated with being a "real gamer" and explains how these stereotypes manifest in the subculture:

> [Women gamers] are super nerdy or super hot or both. They don't know what they are doing, and they do that whole valley girl voice of "Oh, I like *Call of Duty*. It is my favorite game." [The stereotype] is just like girls don't know what

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FIGURE 2

TOKENISTIC MECHANICS OF BOUNDARY WORK AND THE MALADAPTIVE BOUNDARY CROSSING PROCESS



> they are doing because they weren't raised on video games. But that is not true. . .Anyone can be bad at video games and anyone can be good at video games. If [men] come across a female gamer, then they think you don't know the concepts of the game or how to effectively play it. When I talk to buddies of mine about the game, they are surprised because they assume I don't know what I'm talking about. Being a male gamer, technically, they assume the type of video games you play are the hardcore games like *Call of Duty* versus something cutesie. If you're a female and happen to be good at games, then you are assumed to be ugly or gross or not that great of a person. It is a double-edge sword; versus if you're terrible at a game, then they are like, you are probably hot.

The perceived novelty of being a gamer girl reflects tokenism in that a woman is treated as a sort of consumption unicorn in gaming, wherein the subculture does not expect a woman to be playing and then approaches her with both skepticism and awe. Stereotyping intersects with the practice of sexualizing women, by which a woman's value in the gaming community is limited to one of a sex object (Williams et al. 2009). Zoey says, "A lot of times you will look on the internet for a gamer girl and you will see a really cute girl in her underwear with the controller in her mouth." Indeed, as Zoey suggests, a Google search for "gamer girl" reflects this sexualized stereotype of women in gaming (figure 3).

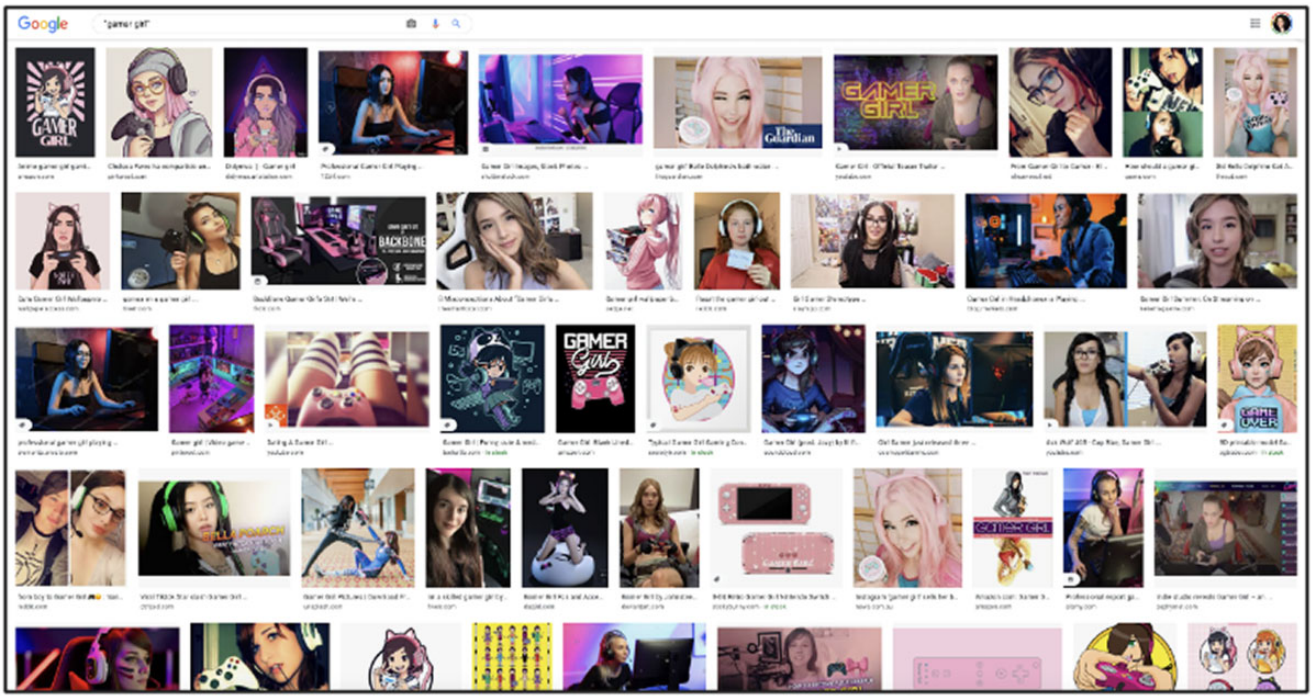
The sexualized image of women in gaming infiltrates the ways women engage in gameplay. For instance, Vivian compares her in-person appearance with her gaming appearance and explains why it matters:

> I usually don't dress up like this for playing games. I am just gaming. I am not dolled up with my hair did or with my boobs out, but that is the stigma. Apparently, people think that female gamers are just there to hook up with these

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FIGURE 3

GOOGLE SEARCH RESULTS FOR "GAMER GIRL"



> lovely, luscious nerd men. . . .The stereotype is that we are sexy, man-hunting women who can't get a man anywhere else.

Vivian's passion for gaming is reduced to sexual attention-seeking. This reflects role entrapment as women are reduced to sexual objects. For example, women in motorcycling are misogynistically deemed "patch chasers" and assumed to be attracted to the outlaw image of men in motorcycling (Martin et al. 2006). Many first-person shooter and team-based RPG games require players to speak live on headsets. As Afton says, "Automatically, when they hear a girl's voice they either get very sexual or very rude because they don't think girls should be playing video games." Our Reddit data reinforce how acutely gendered this experience is. In one thread, a transgender woman, @TheLexGamer, posts a meme describing how she uses online games to "practice girl voice" and is happy when "everyone thinks I am a girl and treats me differently." But she quickly realizes that part of being treated differently includes "people sexually harassing me." In this way, gameplay provides a space for transgender gamers to experience gender affirmation but also to experience tokenistic role entrapment firsthand. Others comment with similar experiences, such as @TheSilentGamer:

> It was a really conflicting and complicated moment for me as even if it wasn't the first time my voice may have passed, it's the first time anyone actually responded to me online naturally assuming I am a girl. It's been really hard transitioning and even the small things matter, so that initial reaction made me really quite happy. But obviously that was very quickly ruined within just a few minutes of the first positive reactions. And I quickly became rather sad and shy over it all. It was so unrelenting and every single person in the group was targeting me and mocking, asking to see my tits and what they wanted to do to me etc. It ruined the good feeling for me but more importantly it also made me realize how my girl friends must feel whenever they play games on their own. I always had that empathy and concern for how girls are treated online, but I think when you are on the receiving end of it yourself you obviously get a much bigger perspective of just how bad it can be. It just makes me a little sad that people have to mute everyone, stay quiet or filter themselves online just to avoid being the target of negative behavior like this.

Role entrapment enables weaponizing a collective consumer identity (e.g., gamer girl) by reducing women to a caricature of a certain role (e.g., inept gamer, sexual seductress). In line with tokenism, weaponizing a collective consumer identity establishes masculine dominance by

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positioning women as deficient and using a woman's gamer identity against them. In gaming, the masculine position is the default: gamer equates man (Jenson and de Castell 2018). As a tokenistic mechanic of boundary work, weaponizing a collective consumer identity establishes social exclusion within the subculture. Consumers are culturally defined by the products they use and the consumption subcultures with which they associate (Arsel and Thompson 2011). In our data, women desire to be associated with the gaming subculture, but in being dubbed gamer girls, weaponizing a collective consumer identity follows a hegemonic, discriminatory model by which women are socially differentiated from the "normal" gaming population and ontologically viewed as abnormal.

Advancing Meritocracy Myths. Meritocracy foregrounds the idea of earning entry into the gaming subculture. The dominant narrative is that anyone can be a gamer, as long as they are "good enough" players. Yet, in our data, women report a myriad of ways through which their achievements are not only constantly surveilled but also actively constrained. In line with tokenism, merit is used to promote an illusion of inclusivity. Women who are deemed "good enough" are used as highly visible props or false evidence of being able to "make it" in gaming, while dismissing the ways merit is constrained. This constitutes the tokenistic mechanic of advancing meritocracy myths, enabled by performance pressures and exemplified by demand for exceptionalism and visibility.

Our data suggest that performance pressures foster meritocracy by which women in gaming are expected to be excellent at gaming to compensate for their alleged inherent shortcomings as women. Men are given the default status of being good and knowledgeable gamers, whereas women experience pressures to be exceptionally good and exceptionally knowledgeable to prove their competence. Valerie says she is "definitely more competitive being a girl" in gaming because she is "trying to beat [guys] to prove how good [she is], and the fact that [she's] a girl doesn't change [her] skill level." Performance pressures are felt by women in gaming as their skill level becomes a proxy for their right to be involved in the gaming subculture. The default inferior status of being a woman places women in a position of having to atone for gender by being exceptionally skilled game players. Nina describes how it feels when other players go from harassing her for being a girl to recognizing her talent as a skilled gamer:

> It is just like I am no longer down here [holds hand down low in interview]; I am at their level or better. It is also an acceptance kind of thing. Like, I don't want their acceptance; I don't need their acceptance. But then, they are like that, and I find it funny when they get to that acceptance level, and they want to game with me because I am good. They take you a little more seriously when they see you are actually good.

Demand for exceptionalism fuels meritocracy myths by reaffirming that women in gaming are lesser than merely for being women; however, exceptions can be made for women who are truly exceptional (e.g., "she is really good for a girl"). This tokenistic mechanic restricts the entrance of women into gaming and promotes a culture that stigmatizes women, but it does so in a way that cannot be perceived as sexist. The dominant discourse becomes: women can absolutely play video games, if they are good enough to play; it is about skill level, not gender. In line with tokenism, women in our study believe that they can subvert gendered boundaries by being exceptionally skilled gamers. Yet, in gaming, it is the men who have power to decide what constitutes a "good gamer." Women are expected to earn merit-based acceptance from men, who, as Gina says, "will let [women] play video games" if they prove their worth enough to "finally get that respect from male gamers." Advancing meritocracy myths allows for the dominant group (i.e., men in gaming) to promote a false sense of achievable inclusion within the gaming subculture: that the basis of acceptance is solely on performance. While men may experience some pressures to perform in the gaming arena, it is assumed that women are poor gamers who must overwhelmingly prove themselves as exceptional to earn entry from men. Women are not afforded entry based on the benefit of the doubt. Tokenism implies that women in gaming, as a subordinate group, are continually tested to prove themselves.

Our findings suggest that access to merit-based resources and power is actively constrained. Women in our data disclosed frequent occasions in which men intentionally targeted women playing on their own team, resulting in a loss for the overall team. Vivian describes one instance while playing *League of Legends*:

> If you are playing *League of Legends*, you get points for fighting this monster or getting this item. When they find out you are a girl, they will go into the forest and kill the monster for you. They take X-rays from you, so when everyone is at max level 20, you are still at 14 and can't do shit. They keep you from being able to do anything, and it makes the entire team lose because they are being dicks. They try to bar you from goals because their entire goal is to make you lose just because there is a female in the game.

Men in gaming take on chivalrous, masculine gender roles, mirroring a form of benevolent sexism (Capodilupo et al. 2010). Fighting a monster on behalf of a woman in a game not only reinforces gender stereotypes but it also has a very practical outcome of padding men's scores while flatlining their women counterparts. Similarly, in a YouTube compilation series, livestreamer Spawntaneous documents her experiences in the first-person shooter game, *Rainbow Six Siege*. In multiple instances, she is the target of "white knighting" (being defended without her consent) and purposefully "team-killed" (being killed by a fellow player).

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Women cannot improve their gaming skills unless they are able to actively participate in gaming; yet, skill-based merit is positioned as the social currency for women to actively participate in gaming in the first place.

Efforts to keep women from boosting their individual scores and skills often cost the entire team potential success. Amber says that teammates "intentionally come to seek me out over and over again, and then I am bad because I am a girl." As Amber expresses, being "bad" at gaming will be attributed to being a girl rather than to the systemic barriers that bar her from gaining clout in the gaming subculture. Performance pressures emphasize that women's essential differences are constantly reemphasized to raise the bar of acceptance (Gill 2014). They can be involved in gaming, but the tokenistic mechanic of advancing meritocracy myths keeps them in their place—never fully involved, never fully accepted, never fully given the same opportunities to earn status.

Women in our study suggest that they are often the only or one of a handful of women in the gaming subculture. The optics of the gaming subculture makes women seem to be a rarity, so that when women are seen in the gaming subculture, all eyes turn to them. This visibility puts additional performance pressures on women in gaming and, in line with conceptualizations of tokenism, creates added stress and tension for the tokenized individual (Kanter 1977). Amber discusses visibility and related performance pressures she experiences as a woman in gaming:

> I am always afraid of not being good at a game because I don't want it to be: I am not good because I am a girl. . .Like, if you do poorly, it feels like it is because you are a girl. I feel like I have to represent to some extent. We are becoming less of a minority; there's a lot more women in gaming now. But because there is still some stigma around female players, that when you do well, you can maybe break that stereotype a little bit.

Amber views herself as an ambassador breaking down gender stereotypes, as all eyes are on her. This hypersurveillance suggests women not only stand out, but they are constantly reminded they stand out. Visibility puts women in a position where their behavior, actions, and appearances are scrutinized (Kanter 1977) to the point that women are used as props. Indeed, visibility allows men in gaming to point to highly visible women as evidence of inclusion in the subculture. In reality, women's status is simultaneously precarious and intrusive.

The tokenistic mechanic of advancing meritocracy myths captures how individual achievement is peddled as a pathway toward gender equity without acknowledging the constraints placed on women in gaming. This is predicated on the concept of merit as defined by the majority group (e.g., men), thus reifying a power imbalance. Prior research suggests that within gendered consumption subcultures, such as motorcycling, women's status is always lower compared to men regardless of skill level; yet, women are heralded for achieving success in a space dominated by men (Martin et al. 2006). Similarly, women who do "make it" in gaming become visible tokens for advancing meritocracy myths. Gendered boundaries, shaped by the patterns of tokenism, mandate that any seeming lack of women in the gaming community is a function of deficient skills rather than a function of sexism.

Enforcing Cultural Gatekeeping Contingencies. One might argue that increased numbers of women gaining acceptance in the gaming community would result in a more gender-neutral experience and more opportunities for women to enter the subculture. Yet, our data show that women are tacitly understood to be on a perpetual probationary period. The terms of this probation rely on adherence to masculine norms of the gaming subculture. This constitutes the tokenistic mechanic of enforcing cultural gatekeeping contingencies, enabled by boundary heightening and exemplified by loyalty tests and isolation. In our data, women must make the tradeoff between upholding the masculine nature of the subculture (engaging in loyalty tests) or being ostensibly pushed out of gaming (accepting isolation).

Women in gaming are burdened with accepting the scripts, rituals, and behaviors embedded within the masculine subculture and created by the dominant group. As women perform in masculine ways to adhere to masculine norms of the subculture, it is not gender equity that is produced but rather women assimilating to masculine dominance. For women to be considered "real gamers," they are expected to be more of a gamer and less of a girl. Chelsey says traits of being "butch" and "masculine" act as contingencies for belonging:

> Because it is a man thing and you must be masculine, you can't be feminine to play. It is either: you are masculine, or that you are not a real gamer and you are just there to "hehe" [fake laughs] and be pretty and sit on the couch. I think the hardest part about being a female gamer is that you have to defend and explain yourself, and you have to describe why you like it. You can't just say you like it. You don't ask a man why he likes football; he just likes football because he is a guy. You don't ask a girl why she likes cooking; she just likes cooking because she is a girl. But, if a guy likes cooking, it is like, "why do you like this?" It is that same sort of thing. You have to have tough skin. You have to be prepared to be able to take whatever it is they are going to say to you and prove yourself. Whether you have to or shouldn't have to, you have to. You also have to be ready to do that. Can you handle this? Because it is going to come at you every day.

Chelsey's comments suggest that men have set the standards for how women are to behave in the masculine subculture of gaming. Women must not only prove their exceptionalism in the subculture, as previously discussed,

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they also must avoid rocking the boat in the wake of any potential attacks. A "tough skin" is required to withstand the sexism and harassment that exists in this community, but that in itself reinforces masculine gender stereotypes of avoiding signs of weakness and of being "strong." Women must ascribe to the established masculine norms because there is an assumption that women should not be playing games. As Chelsey and Gina both suggest, a primary norm is to be able to "take it like a man" and "dish it back" with regard to verbal taunts, which supports hegemonic masculinity through norms of "jocular abuse and competitive banter" (Plester 2015, 542). Research on racist, sexist, and homophobic trash talking in gaming suggests "content of trash talk is seen as nonserious, but the act of trash talking itself is considered an inalienable right" (Cote 2017, 139). In our study, Leslie says, "There's definitely been guys who've said, 'Oh, you should just walk off; you suck; you're a girl; your place is in the kitchen' comments," but she "can't really remember if it was in a malicious way or in a joking way." This line between malice and humor leaves deniability for aggressors. In a Reddit post, @TheInsidiousGamer vents about these "jokes":

> It's been weighting down on me a lot lately. Reading sexual "jokes" about women that I just don't find funny anymore, but I can't even complain in public because if I do, then I can't take a joke. It's even worse when fellow women comment against me, "I'm a girl, and I find it funny." Well that's good for you, hon, but I don't. I'm so disgusted by it all. . . .And they never see what's wrong nor understand why women are annoyed by it. I dare you to complain because they wouldn't have it either. I just keep it inside me all the time, and then I don't want to blow up on the wrong person for the wrong reasons. But I'm so sick of feeling like meat. It's gross. Even when I just want to play. I don't hate men, but it makes me think "fuck, I hate men."

The previous quote articulates not only the expectation to uphold masculine norms (e.g., sexual "jokes") but also how other women become de facto gatekeepers in the process. Comments that align with "I'm a girl, and I find it funny" contribute to boundary heightening by adding validity to masculine norms of the subculture. The premise is that if women want entry, then they must adhere to masculine norms. One woman saying a behavior is okay dismisses the experiences of other women and enables masculine dominance to persist.

Another power dynamic of cultural gatekeeping contingencies is women acting as gatekeepers themselves, as exemplified through loyalty tests. The precarious nature of women's status in gaming means a misstep by one, could be detrimental for others. Gina explains:

> Female gamers usually are judgmental because when you are playing a game with them, and they are being carried by the guy, or they will be like "guys come heal me" or "give me ammo," we are judgmental because they put that on everyone else. We are like, "Why are you doing that?" If you want to be carried, do that somewhere else. It is hard enough to get respect when [other women] come in and do that, well, then [men think] you are all like that.

Women who "make it" in gaming are bolstered as examples that the subculture is not in fact sexist and anyone who passes the loyalty tests can play. In reality, the risk of losing one's own status and acceptance in the gaming community undermines any perceived sense of power in the subculture. Women who are accepted are not granted blanket power to change the gendered nature of the subculture. Rather, they are expected to do the exact opposite: keep out any women who might disrupt the status quo. Women experience forces pulling them in opposite directions and risk coming under suspicion of split loyalties. Are they loyal to the gaming subculture? Or are they loyal to other women? Lydia explains:

> I have played with a few [women] that are good, but I find myself falling into that judgment of, "Oh, does this girl have what it takes?" I find myself being overly critical, and it is unfortunately the result of having that pressure to be good and to show other players your worth. You know, I worked hard to show people I am just as good as they are. What is this person going to do? Are they going to butt into this team and mess things up and make a bad impression for me? It is a two-way street. It is not just men who are critical, women can be just as critical. I mean, again, it is the stereotype of, "Is this girl actually a gamer?" or "Is she doing this to make a boyfriend happy?" or "Is she doing it for attention?" So, I am going to be overly skeptical but if I jump into a game and this person holds their own then I am like, cool, awesome, I have no worries then.

Lydia applies the same standards to other women in the subculture of gaming that were requirements for her own entrance into the subculture. To gain acceptance into the community, women in gaming must adhere to masculine norms, including holding other women to the same high expectations that men place upon them. Women in our study, like Lydia, admit to being overly critical and unaccepting of fellow women, but not out of jealousy nor a desire for the spotlight; rather, out of self-preservation and a desire to maintain their precarious acceptance. This results in a gatekeeping paradox, wherein women restrict the entry of other women as a function of the structuring tokenistic mechanics of boundary work.

To say women are preventing other women from entering the subculture of gaming would oversimplify the felt tensions women experience and place blame on women as gatekeepers. In reality, their gatekeeping power in the subculture is contingent on ascribing to the masculine norms set for them by men. Enforcing cultural gatekeeping contingencies promotes a fallacy of gender equity within the gaming subculture, suggesting that anyone can play video

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games as long as they adhere to the masculine norms of the culture. Yet, these norms are inherently biased to support masculine dominance in the subculture.

Boundary heightening also enables enforcing cultural gatekeeping contingencies through isolation. Failure to engage in loyalty tests can result in women being formally and informally isolated, as outsiders from the dominant group. Women in our data report a myriad of ways isolation manifests. For instance, Hannah says her male roommates consistently asked her boyfriend to play video games but "when I would come home, they just expect me to sit there and watch. It was frustrating, like, why not offer me a controller, instead of one of your male counterparts?"

Being locked out of gaming prevents women from being fully immersed in the subculture. Across our data, women report experiencing exclusionary actions in gameplay such as sexual advances and being actively muted, which further relegates them to play by themselves. On one woman's Twitch livestream, a man ponders the possibility of relegating all women to a separate gameplay server, saying, "Can we just region lock all the female gamers? That would be great." Mentioning this possibility socializes women to understand their subordinate role in gaming and keep them there thus exemplifying boundary heightening. This isolation, as a result of failing loyalty tests, is evident in our data. For instance, several news stories from our data cover an instance at a live conference with the creators of *World of Warcraft* in which a woman asked the panel of men about their design decisions, saying, "I love what you guys have done with *World of Warcraft*. I love the fact that you have a lot of strong female characters. However, I was wondering if we can have some that don't look like they stepped out of a Victoria's Secret catalog?" The crowd quickly turned on the woman with collective booing followed by a sarcastic response from one panelist asking, "Which catalog would you like them to step out of?" This exchange reflects how gaming environments—both the games themselves and the consumption community—tacitly tell women: this space is not meant for you. Women are an afterthought.

Women are not explicitly denied entry in the gaming subculture; rather, invisible fencing keeps gendered boundaries in place by enforcing cultural gatekeeping contingencies. They can either ascribe to the norms of the masculine subculture or be shut out altogether. In response to boundary heightening, tokenized individuals either accept isolation or continually engage in loyalty tests to the dominant culture—despite accusations of betrayal to their token group (i.e., other women in gaming) or potential for making gender harassment even worse (i.e., being targeted). Thus, because of tokenism, women's status in the gaming community is contingent on gaining acceptance from the dominant gatekeepers (i.e., men) but in an environment structured to make acceptance an impossibility.

In sum, women in gaming are subject to: (1) role entrapment, which constitute being stereotyped, sexualized, and ascribed a gamer-girl identity that effectively weaponizes a collective consumer identity against them; (2) performance pressures, which operate under the guise that exceptional performance leads to acceptance into the community thereby advancing meritocracy myths to reaffirm that female gamers are lesser than and to keep them in their place; and (3) boundary heightening, which isolates them or forces engagement in loyalty tests to the masculine gaming subculture as a function of enforcing cultural gatekeeping contingencies. Collectively, these tokenistic mechanics of boundary work form the basis for social exclusion while dangling the hope of inclusion. To subvert gendered boundaries, women turn to strategies, or response enactments; however, as we will outline in the next section, these response enactments represent maladaptive boundary crossing and result in inadvertently contributing to the cultural persistence of masculine dominance.

Response Enactments and Maladaptive Boundary Crossing

Data suggest that women utilize five types of response enactments: self-policing, reprimanding, grandstanding, withdrawing, and acquiescing. At a micro level, these response enactments represent resistant efforts to counteract—or cross—the gendered boundaries. At a meso level, however, response enactments are structured by the tokenistic mechanics of boundary work and inadvertently reinforce masculine dominance. The gaming subculture has been structured in such a way—through the tokenistic mechanics of boundary work—that women's efforts to make progress or advance gender equity inadvertently contribute to upholding masculine dominance. We term this recursive process maladaptive boundary crossing, or the process by which individual attempts to cross gendered boundaries at the micro level (e.g., through response enactments) get churned through the structuring meso-level tokenistic mechanics of boundary work and result in the inadvertent cultural persistence of masculine dominance within the consumption subculture. Here, we detail the five response enactments and how they exhibit maladaptive boundary crossing.

Self-Policing. Self-policing involves maintaining control of one's own behaviors to cross gendered boundaries enabled by tokenism. Women alter their actions and appearances in gaming spaces by turning off their live chat microphones (e.g., "I turn off my microphone because I don't want them to think I am a girl."—Piper) or by playing as male avatars or characters (e.g., "Sometimes we pretend to be guys…You want to represent yourself in the game but you also feel like you have to keep yourself on the down low, so you don't get told to go to the

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kitchen."—Vivian). To cross these boundaries, women self-police by hiding in plain sight. As Aisha explains, women not only police their own behaviors in the gaming experience, they also carefully police the gaming spaces they enter into:

> A lot of times girls have to be extra careful about which games they go into and stuff because like, going into chat rooms and stuff, it can be a lot more difficult because you get a lot more harassment and prejudice for the hard, hard core gamer type stuff.

What Aisha deems "hard, hard core gamer type stuff" are games that are dominantly considered to be for "real gamers" and by proxy, associated with masculine dominance. Women in our data express their love for these games but recognize that they face increased harm in these spaces, particularly in online gameplay.

Self-policing, as a response enactment, reflects maladaptive boundary crossing as women learn to navigate the masculine subculture by altering and augmenting their own behaviors to align with masculinity, thereby limiting potential individual gender-based harassment but inadvertently enabling the cultural persistence of masculine dominance. They suppress signs of femininity to make themselves unrecognizable as women so they can pass as "real gamers." An unintended consequence is that these actions make it appear as if women were not actively involved in the gaming subculture, and that the space is indeed dominated by men—further enforcing cultural gatekeeping contingencies. In reality, many women are playing video games with their identities cloaked. Perceptions of the subculture retain masculine dominance while women hide in plain sight, despite this being a genuine attempt to cross gendered boundaries structured by tokenism (e.g., visibility, stereotyping, loyalty tests).

Reprimanding. Reprimanding involves rebuking offenders, either publicly or privately, that cross gendered boundaries enabled by tokenism. For instance, Tara frequently attends gaming conventions with people she does not know. She says she "normally has really positive experiences once they get over the fact I have a vagina," but "if someone gets crappy, they get called out." Tara's response enactment of reprimanding her perpetrators is echoed throughout our data, as women attempt to cross gendered boundaries. For instance, Lydia is an avid gamer who works in a gaming store, where she uses reprimanding to combat masculine dominance:

> I was asked by an adult man how I got a job [at the gaming store] because "girls don't play video games." Like specifically he looks at me and says, "How did you get a job here being a lady?" And I was like, "What do you mean?" And he was like, "Well girls don't play video games." I was like, "Yes, yes I do." The best I can do is try to correct them and try to show them that their opinion is incorrect.

To disrupt the status quo of masculine dominance, Tara and Lydia reprimand offenders; however, this encumbers women with the responsibility to prove they belong, further advancing meritocracy myths and simultaneously risking their contingent status in the subculture. High-profile women in gaming have faced increased harassment from publicly reprimanding offenders (Braithwaite 2016), and women in our study express fear that the same might happen to them. Nina, who works in the gaming industry, says that security at gaming conventions will "crack down on guys so there is no harassment toward girls, but when you go to play, they all attack you," thus mirroring how women are isolated through tokenism and tacitly prohibited from gaining status (i.e., merit). An in-game option for reprimanding offenders is to use software features such as flagging, reporting, or blocking other players. But Nina says reporting "does not really do much" because "they can just make another account and come after you again," suggesting that these tools do little to change behavior and, in fact, make things worse.

As a response enactment, reprimanding reflects maladaptive boundary crossing as women stand up for themselves to disrupt the status quo of masculine dominance; yet, to do so, women must put themselves in perilous situations marked by heightened risks. Reprimanding, either in person or in gameplay, inherently violates loyalty tests required to uphold masculine dominance and can make them even more visible targets for attacks. Women's efforts to cross gendered boundaries—through verbal reprimanding (e.g., calling out offenders) or behavioral reprimanding (e.g., reporting or blocking offenders)—inadvertently contribute to the cultural persistence of masculine dominance by forcing women to risk their own precarious status in the gaming subculture. Furthermore, failure to reprimand offenders allows masculine dominance to persist, reflecting a lose–lose situation for women.

Grandstanding. Grandstanding involves asserting context-dependent expertise to cross gendered boundaries enabled by tokenism. Women use grandstanding by demonstrating their gaming prowess and knowledge (e.g., game plots, characters, shorthand language, record of play). Ruby notes, "When I say I'm a gamer, I say it proudly because I'm good." She is an avid fan of *Call of Duty*, and if anyone questions her, she is quick to cite her kill–death ratio in the game as evidence of her expertise. Ruby's use of grandstanding is based on her gameplay but rooted in the knowledge that a kill–death ratio is a key metric of expertise. This type of keen knowledge of the subculture is critical in using grandstanding as a response enactment. Marisa says that her experiences in the gaming community are "not always terrible," but sometimes others do not take her seriously as a gamer simply because she is a woman:

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> Some people will really respect my opinion and my advice to them, and other people will just not want to hear what I have to say, because I am not a man. I kind of want to show them they are wrong, so I will give them the answers, like, I proved them wrong. I don't know how to word it—kind of put them in their place. I know just as much or more than them. Other times, guys think I can't beat them, and I destroy them. Like, yeah, take that, you got beat by a girl.

Marisa flaunts her gaming expertise as an act of grandstanding, which is inherently linked to the tokenistic mechanics of boundary work (e.g., advancing meritocracy myths and weaponizing a collective consumer identity). Through grandstanding, women attempt to jettison stereotypes of "gamer girls" by proving they are exceptional gamers and outperforming the naysayers.

Women in our data expect to be pressed on their knowledge. They spend time streaming video gamers online, reading blogs about new releases, and immersing themselves in gaming knowledge to prepare for grandstanding. Paige says, "If you are a man, it is assumed: you are a male, you play this kind of game," but if you are a woman "you have to go in-depth and have to talk about what they are talking about." Afton advises other gamers to "stand your ground" and "tell the boys you know what you're talking about" but warns "you have to work ten times harder just because you are a girl." Women are acutely aware of their precarious status in the subculture, and, to contend with inevitable misogyny, they brandish their expertise and knowledge. However, the response enactment of grandstanding reflects maladaptive boundary crossing in that it reinforces the belief that to belong in the community, women must be exceptionally good—and must prove their status over and over again. Attempts to quell the gamer girl stereotype by grandstanding inadvertently supports the tokenistic advancement of meritocracy myths. Thus, grandstanding is a way to bear the weight of an increased pressure to perform by succumbing to such demands.

Withdrawing. Withdrawing involves removing oneself from parts of the gaming subculture, or from gaming altogether, to cross gendered boundaries enabled by tokenism. Afton describes her experiences withdrawing from the gaming subculture:

> You can see each other's characters. I am obviously a girl character, so if they see that, they will automatically target it and kill you. And they will kill you again and again. It just frustrates you to the point you leave the game and either go to a different world or stop playing entirely. Like me, because sometimes I get frustrated, so I stop playing. I just get frustrated. I will leave the game and not play anymore. It is just frustrating because you want to play the game too, and if I am playing *Call of Duty*, I literally just want to shoot people. But also, I don't feel like getting hit on by people or being the target just because I am a girl kicking your butt. An example would be *Grand Theft Auto*. I have not played that in a while because that is what happens every time I play it. So, I am like, "Nope, done with that, I am going to go do something else."

An appeal of gaming is the gameplay itself—the frivolity, the excitement, and the opportunity for social interaction; however, as Afton suggests, women can feel robbed of the positive aspects of gaming and, as a result, turn to withdrawing. Women in our data cherish being gamers; yet, they must make a tradeoff between either putting up with the toxicity or leaving a game they love. This tradeoff makes the response enactment of withdrawing seem like a woman's free choice, when, in reality, it is deeply rooted in the tokenistic mechanics of boundary work (e.g., visibility, isolation)—to the point that women feel forced to leave. As Ivy says, "If it gets to be too bad, then I just go watch Netflix, because I shouldn't be getting stressed when I don't want to be stressed." Chelsey says she has had to "stray away from multiplayer games where being called derogatory names becomes an issue" because gaming is meant to be a stress release but "that is more stressful than fun, relaxing, and enjoyable." Withdrawing is a protective response enactment, meant to cross boundaries by alleviating undue harm experienced within the gaming subculture; however, withdrawing reifies the masculine dominance of the subculture.

Withdrawing reflects maladaptive boundary crossing as women remove themselves from gaming in search of safer spaces, but this inadvertently fortifies the cultural persistence of masculine subculture, underscoring the suggestion that women do not belong. In line with the tokenistic mechanics of boundary work, withdrawing makes it seem like women choose to leave the gaming subculture due to disinterest (e.g., stereotyping) or failure to succeed (e.g., meritocracy) when, in reality, removing themselves fully or partially from the gaming community is a product of tokenism. In essence, women are methodically told, "If you do not like it here, you can leave"—and so they do.

Acquiescing. Acquiescing involves accepting gaming culture as a static environment to cross gendered boundaries enabled by tokenism. By acquiescing, women recognize gaming as a boys-will-be-boys culture and behave as reluctant participants. Afton explains:

> I would say for the most part it is fun as long as you can stick to yourself. If you want to venture out and make friends and stuff, it can be kind of hard right now because a lot of people are just sexist or are just rude. You are going to get that no matter what game you play, you will find a lot of rude people. If you are a gamer girl, it is just going to be harder for you because that is just how the gaming world is—that is just how it is.

This just-how-it-is mentality is echoed across the data. Shifting the culture is presented like an overwhelming and

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unattainable task—particularly for individual women to achieve on their own. Women like Afton resign themselves to functioning in the gaming space without trying to alter the masculine dominance of the subculture. This tacitly reinforces cultural gatekeeping contingencies, as women make no attempts to change the masculine nature of the gaming subculture (e.g., loyalty tests) and learn to stick to themselves (e.g., isolation).

The apathy exhibited in acquiescing affords women the opportunity to compartmentalize the environment, focusing solely on gaming itself. Ignoring sexism within the subculture alleviates them from the pressure of trying to change the subculture. Women in our study suggest that they "learn to put it behind [themselves]" and "deal with it" (Kiara) or "just say fine and roll with it" (Nina). The masculine dominance of the subculture has long been the norm, and women in our data have a hard time believing progress might be made. Marisa explains:

> I don't know, I guess that is how it has always been. I would hope it would change, but it doesn't seem to be getting better. [Gaming] can be really awesome at times but be disheartening at other times.

A constant and historically enduring culture of socially constructed gendered boundaries can be dejecting, and to expect women to be catalysts for change can be daunting. The socially constructed belief that gaming is a man's world maintains the perception that it will continue to be a man's world. Rather than fighting against it, women acquiesce—not through consent but by making concessions.

Acquiescing reflects maladaptive boundary crossing by allowing women to exist in the subculture without the pressure of being the voice of change. This enables women to play video games and participate in the subculture, but it becomes maladaptive in that such boundary crossing is only done by further adhering to masculine norms. In line with the tokenistic mechanics of boundary work, acquiescing reflects a reluctant acceptance of the status quo: women come to expect the weaponization of their collective consumer identity and resign themselves to it. De-emphasizing the malicious nature of gender discrimination as a situation that is to be expected contributes to the cultural persistence of masculine dominance.

DISCUSSION

Our research suggests that women live in a less than utopian gaming world where gendered boundaries remain despite individual attempts at progress within the subculture—in part because these boundaries are shaped by tokenistic mechanics of boundary work. Extending research on boundary work, we introduce the concept of maladaptive boundary crossing to capture how efforts to subvert masculine dominance at a micro level (e.g., through response enactments) can be counterproductive to reconfiguring meso-level gendered boundaries that persist in the subculture. Our contributions lie in articulating how gendered boundaries persist—despite the so-called progress—and how the cultural legacy of tokenism perpetuates inequity beyond quantitative measures of representation. In this section, we further discuss the contributions and relevance of this research.

Gendered Boundaries and the Precarious Promise of Progress

Boundary work is essential to understanding the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in the marketplace. Prior studies focus on how consumers navigate socially constructed boundaries through approaches such as coping mechanisms (Sandikci and Ger 2010), boundary subversion (Martin et al. 2006), change strategies (Scaraboto and Fischer 2013), and other forms of identity negotiation (Thompson and Üstüner 2015). Such strategies are collectively akin to our micro-level concept of response enactments. Our research, however, extends these works by redirecting attention to how women's response enactments, or efforts to cross gendered boundaries, are inherently grounded in the meso-level structuring tokenistic mechanics of boundary work. Such mechanics are evident in other consumption subcultures. Fatshionistas attempt to reclaim a weaponized collective consumption identity (Scaraboto and Fischer 2013); women in rock climbing reflect meritocracy myths (Ferguson, Brace-Govan, and Martin 2020); and at-home fathers experience cultural gatekeeping contingencies (Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013). By delineating this micro–meso relationship, we direct attention to how gendered boundaries are made to seem permeable but are in fact fraught with constraints. The promise of progress lies in a cultural agreement that gendered boundaries can be subverted, changed, or eradicated through individual advances toward gender equity. Our research suggests that this promise is precarious.

Maladaptive boundary crossing captures this precariousness and offers an apt conceptual tool for examining how individual behaviors (micro) fit within cultural norms (meso). The question previous scholars ask is, how do women successfully navigate gendered boundaries? The question we ask is, successful for whom? For instance, in the craft beer culture, women must order masculine "real beers" to claim cultural legitimacy (Darwin 2018), but our study suggests that drinking, liking, or knowing about the so-called real beers does little to transform the gendered boundaries of the subculture. It becomes a bait and switch: women are promised progress if they are good enough (e.g., gamers), fashionable enough (e.g., fatshionistas), or tough enough (e.g., derby girls); yet, the dominant group still determines what enough is. In line with prior research, these taste regimes (Arsel and Bean 2013) perpetuate existing gendered boundaries as a function of consumption

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choices and preferences (e.g., video games, beers). For every two progressive steps forward, there is a regressive step backward due to caveats and contingencies. Thus, our research offers a nuanced approach to examining how micro-level behaviors and meso-level structures work in tandem to maintain gendered boundaries within consumption subcultures.

Response enactments can operate effectively to navigate discriminatory social activity at the micro level, but they can perpetuate power asymmetries at the meso level. For example, response enactments like acquiescing and withdrawing function to produce a sense of disillusionment at the collective level—much like shattered identity projects found in constrained poor Turkish communities (Üstüner and Holt 2007). While other enactments do not directly produce disillusionment, they result in varied outcomes and social expectations at the meso level that reinforce the masculine dominance. Reinforcing the dominance of a hegemonic norm within a subculture extends to other consumption contexts. Crockett's (2017) study of respectability politics and anti-racist consumption suggests "managing everyday racism seeks to make daily life more tolerable, not necessarily more equal" (555). Similarly, our study finds that women's efforts to manage everyday sexism in the context of gaming has an unintended consequence of reifying the gendered boundaries they aim to subvert. This precariousness of progress is mirrored in other masculine subcultures such as in the ESPN Zone entertainment space, where women must adapt to the masculine dominance "or else" (Sherry et al. 2004, 151), and in motorcycling, where women adopt hegemonic hypermasculinity as a form of empowerment (Martin et al. 2006). In such cases, maladaptive boundary crossing points to how response enactments inadvertently reinforce masculine dominance, specifically misogyny (Manne 2017).

Consumers turn to the marketplace—both online and in-person—as a space for contesting devalued consumer identities (Maciel and Wallendorf 2021), compensating for status threats (Goor, Keinan, and Ordabayeva 2021), and asserting cultural value of a claimed identity position (Scaraboto and Fischer 2013). Prior research provides valuable insight into individual identity performances (Schau, Gilly, and Wolfinbarger 2009), particularly regarding gender (Maciel and Wallendorf 2021; Thompson and Üstüner 2015). But this implies that consumers can claim individual identities in the first place. In contrast, as a function of the structuring tokenistic mechanics of boundary work, women in gaming are repeatedly denied claim to the "real gamer" identity—no matter how high their scores are or how they prove themselves. Our study offers constructive critique to the concepts of status and social mobility (Bourdieu 1977), which center individual consumer behaviors as mechanisms for gaining or losing status in a subculture. In gaming, successful women are looked to as symbols of progress, praised for overcoming the burdens, challenges, and odds to exist in a consumption space. While women who successfully rise through the ranks might act as inspirational role models for others, our research suggests that this inspirational evidence of progress obscures the reasons such hurdles exist and, in fact, can be used to maintain masculine dominance even as gendered boundaries seemingly shift. Opportunities to get better at gaming and fit in with the guys are predicated on the promise of progress at a micro level without acknowledging restrictive meso-level structures.

Importantly, our research suggests that progress by permission does not equate to progress by power. Permitting someone to be in a space does not necessarily grant them power in that space; it chips away at gendered boundaries but does not provide equitable power. A preoccupation with understanding how marginalized individuals can "make it" by crossing socially constructed boundaries overshadows how discriminatory boundaries remain deeply entrenched. In the marketplace and in public policy, we see this tension unfold in domains such as abortion rights in the United States where the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision ushered an era of legalized abortion only to be overturned in 2022, despite overwhelming public support for reproductive rights (Hartig 2022). Pregnant people were permitted to get abortions but not given the power to secure this right. In gaming, women are celebrated for managing to exist and even thrive in a consumption subculture that rejects their existence. Such "empowerment"-oriented schemas ignore how the tokenistic mechanics of boundary work shape the conditions of survival and the so-called success in a misogynistic domain. Individuals who are celebrated for their visible victories become potential unexpected tools for inequity to persist. Thus, maladaptive boundary crossing offers a theoretical explanation of how response enactments, utilized by women to cross socially constructed gendered boundaries, produce unintended or counterproductive consequences for gender equity. This calls for scholarly work to examine how and why discriminatory boundaries in consumption contexts remain in place, despite the so-called progress.

The Cultural Legacy of Tokenism in the Marketplace

Our research contributes to the burgeoning stream of literature that redefines the concept of tokenism from a sociocultural perspective, beyond a numbers game (Holgersson and Romani 2020). In gaming, women are numerically present and active, yet, collectively, their presence is continually contested. They are deemed interlopers. Indeed, traditional quota-oriented tokenism perspectives (Watkins et al. 2019) suggest that gamers like Chiquita Evans represent positive advances toward gender equity in gaming. However, our research demonstrates the cultural embeddedness of tokenism. For every first woman video gamer

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playing *NBA 2K* professionally in mainstream e-sports, there are multiple women playing from their bedrooms, living rooms, and dorms, who are tokenized in smaller everyday arenas. It is persistent and malicious. Publicized cases such as the 2014 GamerGate online harassment campaign (Braithwaite 2016) and the 2021 Activision Blizzard sexual harassment lawsuit (Chalk 2021) make headlines, but what lies beneath is a cultural legacy of tokenism lived by everyday consumers. Marketplace dynamics obfuscate traditional notions of quotas as a remedy for inequity. This represents a type of trickle-down tokenism that operates as a cultural norm, rather than a statistical quota. The cultural legacy of tokenism reinforces the notion that the inclusion of women in gaming is a necessary but insufficient condition for lasting cultural change.

Our analysis shows how using tokenism as a conceptual lens can lend analytical power to better understand the complexity of exclusionary boundaries in the marketplace by reflecting invisible processes (e.g., maladaptive boundary crossing) that sustain discriminatory ideologies. Tokenism allows for a critical analysis of a consumption subculture by studying stigmatized individuals who may be tokenized and made examples of equity. In our study, the cultural legacy of tokenism is both externally imposed on women, and internalized and imposed by women themselves, as they learn to abide by or buy into tokenistic mechanics of boundary work under false promises of inclusion. Theoretically, tokenism enables us to see the recursive process of maladaptive boundary crossing and provides a powerful conceptual lens for exploring inequity. While our study focuses on masculine dominance, future consumer research should explore the cultural legacy of tokenism and other similar systems of domination including racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, classism, ageism, islamophobia, xenophobia, antisemitism, and others. This is particularly salient given increased calls by scholars, practitioners, and policymakers to address diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the marketplace (Arsel, Crockett, and Scott 2022)—concepts that are inherently shaped by systems of domination.

Marketing—as a practice and as an academic field—risks conflating DEI with virtue signaling and individual actions without fundamentally addressing the structural underpinnings of inequity. In its original conceptualization, diversity means valuing differences, equity means valuing fairness, and inclusion means valuing belonging. Yet, diversity ideology has been co-opted resulting in reinscribed systemic whiteness and a melding of DEI to protect "the structural advantages and privileges of those in power" (Mayorga-Gallo 2019, 1795). Similarly, as our study shows, maladaptive boundary crossing—enabled by tokenism—is an unofficial proxy for exclusion resulting in reinscribed masculine dominance, while seeming to push against it. Our research casts new light on DEI and how diversity has potentially become diluted in the marketplace in service to tokenism, with potential implications across an array of domains: sexuality (Eichert and Luedicke 2022), race (Bone, Christensen, and Williams 2014), ability (Beudaert 2020), religion (Sandıkcı, and Ger 2010), age (Barnhart and Peñaloza 2013), bodies (Scaraboto and Fischer 2013), and national origin (Peñaloza 1994). In each domain, as long as the default norm remains implicit—straight, white, able-bodied, Christian, young, thin, and Western, respectively—then the underlying social hierarchy remains unchanged. Scholars should further explore how the buzzwords of DEI become diluted, in service to systems of dominance, as they intersect with a deeply entrenched cultural legacy of tokenism.

This stream of research could also be enriched through frameworks of intersectionality, which investigate how power relations influence social relations as a function of intersecting categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, class, nation, ability, ethnicity, and age, among others (Crenshaw 2017). Given systems of dominance operate within intersecting systems of oppression, future scholarship should explore mutually compounding effects of dominance across differently positioned consumers (Crenshaw 2017). Our study captures unidimensional depth (e.g., interviews with cisgender women in the United States); however, future studies should capture how inequity is multiplied or mitigated across a web of identities. Importantly, Rosa-Salas and Sobande (2022) caution that intersectionality is quickly replacing diversity as the buzzword du jour. Citing Bilge, they write intersectionality's popularization has resulted in "'widespread misrepresentation, tokenization, displacement and disarticulation' [Bilge 2013, 410] from the critique of interconnected oppressions that the concept was originally intended to encompass." To that end, marketing scholars must reflect upon how our studies inadvertently contribute to the cultural legacy of tokenism in service to DEI and/or intersectionality, both in methodological procedures (e.g., claims around "recruiting a diverse sample," treating singularized participants as tokens and/or as representative of an entire population) and in reporting findings which reify or repress structural oppression or power dynamics.

A limitation of focusing on micro–meso level processes is that our data do not directly speak to macro-level outcomes by which social change is sustained in the marketplace. Future research could provide insight into how consumers, who typically recognize and respond to inequity individually, transition from varied response enactments to forms of organized collective action in the marketplace, which as Henry (2010) argues, is far less common as a social occurrence. For instance, one could argue that response enactments—when coordinated en masse—may have alternative implications for upending inequities. For instance, withdrawing en masse may be akin to buycotting, and grandstanding en masse may be akin to social movements like #MeToo. Future research

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should also investigate how the tokenistic mechanics of boundary work function across gendered contexts and identities. For example, women leaders are dubbed "girlbosses" as a form of self-branded empowered femininity; however, "girlboss rhetoric often works to propagate sexism, racism, and class elitism" (Maguire 2020, n.p.). Much like the "gamer girl" moniker reflects tokenistic role entrapment and weaponization of a gendered identity, girlbossing culture separates and tokenizes women in leadership. Future research should explore how the cultural legacy of tokenism manifests across consumption subcultures.

The purpose of this research has been to better understand how gendered boundaries persist in consumption subcultures despite efforts to persist, despite efforts to transform, or even eradicate them. In doing so, we can begin to confront the systemic—and often veiled—ways discriminatory practices manifest in the marketplace between the micro and meso levels of consumption subcultures. While our research indeed conveys a degree of potential hopelessness in achieving gender equity, understanding the mechanics by which dominance is perpetuated and concealed is an important step toward actionable changes. At a time when discussions around DEI efforts are present across the marketplace—from boardrooms to classrooms, from government war rooms to consumers' living rooms—marketing and consumption scholars, practitioners, and policymakers have a responsibility to address interventions, without which, inequities will persist.

DATA COLLECTION INFORMATION

Regarding data collection, the second author conducted the bulk of interviews with informants in Michigan, USA. The first author conducted one in Illinois, USA, and the third author conducted two in South Carolina, USA. All interviews were conducted face to face with informants, between autumn of 2015 to autumn of 2017. The first author managed the data via MaxQDA qualitative data analysis software. Online data were collected in summer of 2021. Social media data via Reddit were collected by the second author and shared via Google Drive among authors. YouTube data were collected within the YouTube platform, saved to a private playlist created by the first author, and shared jointly among authors. The first and second authors conducted the online fieldwork independently via Twitch observations. The first and second authors downloaded news media content, industry reports, and other archival data (advertisements). Data were discussed and jointly analyzed on multiple occasions by all three authors. Coding notes, digital artifacts (e.g., screenshots), text files, and other data traces were stored in a shared Google Drive among all three authors. Data have also been archived in ResearchBox.

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