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Self-Concept of Online Game Players: A Phenomenological Study on Female Gamers Experiencing Sexism in the PUBG Mobile Community "KLG Team"

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Abstract: This study explores how female players in the Indonesian PUBG Mobile community "KLG TEAM" construct their self-concept and negotiate gender identity within a gaming environment that is culturally perceived as masculine. Using a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews with four active members, the research reveals that these women face persistent sexism, stereotyping, and exclusion from male players who question their competence. However, rather than withdrawing, they reinterpret such experiences as motivation to strengthen their confidence and prove their capabilities. Guided by the lens of symbolic interactionism, the study highlights the interrelation of mind, self, and society in shaping the players' perceptions and behaviors. The findings demonstrate that these female gamers develop a positive self-concept through their participation in a supportive all-female subculture that validates their skills and experiences. Their engagement in the KLG TEAM not only provides emotional empowerment but also challenges dominant gender norms in the digital gaming space. Ultimately, the study underscores that female gamers actively reconstruct meanings of femininity, competence, and community in online games, transforming digital spaces into arenas for identity negotiation and gender equity. This research contributes to the growing literature on gender, symbolic interaction, and digital culture, emphasizing how self-concept evolves through interaction and resistance in virtual contexts.

Keyword: Symbolic Interactionism; Self-Concept; Female Gamers; Gender and Digital Culture; PUBG Mobile

INTRODUCTION

The advancement of digital technology has significantly transformed the online gaming landscape, especially in the realm of *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* (PUBG) Mobile, which has become a cultural phenomenon among young people worldwide. PUBG Mobile, developed by Tencent and officially released on March 19, 2018, is a *battle royale* game that allows players to compete individually (*solo*), in pairs (*duo*), or in groups of four (*squad*). Each match features 100 players who battle in real time to be the last one standing. Originally

dominated by male players, PUBG Mobile has since attracted a growing number of female players, reflecting a shift in gender dynamics within the gaming world. However, this inclusion has also exposed persistent issues of sexism, discrimination, and gender-based stereotypes that female gamers often face. According to Balqis (2022), sexism in online games manifests through prejudices that portray female players as less skilled, weak, or burdensome to their teams.

A 2020 study by Sensor Tower reported that PUBG Mobile had reached 734 million players globally by July of that year, confirming its position as one of the most popular mobile games in the world. Despite this success, the *battle royale* genre—combining survival, exploration, and teamwork—remains largely perceived as a male-dominated space (Balqis, 2022). The gameplay requires players to search for weapons, equipment, and resources to survive while eliminating opponents and avoiding the shrinking "safe zone." The last surviving individual or team wins. This competitive, strategic environment tends to reinforce gender stereotypes that discourage female participation or undermine their abilities.

As the number of players continues to grow, gender roles within gaming communities have evolved, introducing new patterns of social interaction. Historically, gaming spaces were male-centered, but women now participate more actively and competitively. Although female gamers have proven their skills and capabilities, their presence is still comparatively smaller than that of male players (Askamal & Hendriyani, 2021). Quantifoundry, as cited in Setiawan (2020a), found that most women tend to prefer casual genres—69% play *match* games and 42% play *family* or *farm simulator* games. These genres typically require less intensive teamwork or strategic coordination compared to *battle royale* games. When women choose to engage in complex, strategy-based games like PUBG Mobile, they often face condescending attitudes and exclusionary treatment from male peers (Askamal & Hendriyani, 2021).

The gender bias in online games reflects a broader social issue of inequality between men and women. Gender, as defined by Askamal and Hendriyani (2021), encompasses values and behaviors socially constructed and differentiated between males and females. These distinctions are culturally transmitted and often perpetuate through socialization, resulting in structural gender disparities. Handayani (2018) emphasizes that gender discourse remains sensitive, generating both support and resistance due to its deep-rooted cultural implications. Consequently, societal norms that valorize masculinity over femininity persist, leading to stereotyping and gender discrimination.

Gender stereotypes in gaming manifest through social judgments about what women should or should not do. Pramesty (2021a) explains that stereotypes are shaped by cultural interpretations rather than objective observation. They are formed and reinforced through communication and interaction, often resulting in rigid and biased assumptions about others. The most common stereotype in both Indonesian and global contexts is the belief that online gaming is inherently a masculine activity, with women perceived as unsuitable or incapable participants (Adyapradana, 2018). A 2021 survey by Reach3 and Lenovo revealed that 77% of female gamers had experienced gender stereotyping or discriminatory behavior from male players. These included comments that women lacked gaming skills or did not belong in the gaming community. As a coping mechanism, 59% of the surveyed women reported concealing their gender identity while playing (Reach3 & Lenovo, 2021, cited in Pramesty, 2021b).

Stereotypes simplify complex realities, creating shortcuts in human cognition that often lead to prejudice (Hermawan, 2021). For instance, the belief that "women are weak" reduces diverse individual capabilities into a generalized assumption. Such thinking contributes to mockery and exclusion, making it difficult to change existing biases. As Setiawan (2020a) argues, stereotypes tend to generate sexism, resulting in lower self-esteem among affected

individuals. Handayani (2018) further notes that female players are often viewed as emotional, submissive, and passive—traits culturally associated with femininity—while male players are perceived as rational, dominant, and aggressive. These contrasting labels reinforce social hierarchies within gaming communities.

The media also plays a role in perpetuating gender stereotypes. According to Apriadi Tamburaka (as cited in Kumoro, 2017), the mass media often reproduces outdated images of men and women that reinforce patriarchal norms. Harahap et al. (2020) highlight that patriarchal religious interpretations further legitimize gender inequality, positioning women as unfit for leadership roles. Arrochmah (2021) adds that gender stereotypes sustain beliefs that associate masculinity with strength and rationality, while femininity is linked to emotional fragility. In Indonesia, these perceptions have become culturally ingrained, making female gamers more vulnerable to discrimination.

In this context, female PUBG Mobile players face persistent challenges in being recognized for their skills and contributions. They are often relegated to supportive roles—such as collecting supplies or assisting male teammates—rather than being acknowledged as strategic players. This marginalization is particularly evident in the case of the *KLG Team*, a PUBG Mobile community founded on July 19, 2019, by a female gamer named Devina. Initially established as a casual group to find gaming partners, KLG Team has evolved into a competitive community participating in *fun tournaments*. The team now consists of 40 members, 35 of whom are male and 5 female, with communication primarily conducted via WhatsApp and in-game voice chat.

Devina founded KLG Team after repeatedly experiencing gender-based exclusion—male players often left matches upon realizing they were teamed with a woman. In interviews, she reported being told that playing with a woman was a "burden," using the gaming term "carrying," which implies that male players must protect or "carry" their female teammates (Askamal & Hendriyani, 2021). This dynamic reduces women to passive participants tasked with gathering weapons or medical supplies, rather than contributing strategically to the game. The team's name, "KLG," short for *Keluarga* (Family), symbolizes Devina's vision of building a supportive community where members treat one another equally.

Despite this inclusive ideal, challenges persist. Female members such as Putri, Eka, and Uwu report that their opinions are often ignored during gameplay. For example, Putri described instances where her suggestions to move locations to avoid opponents were disregarded by male teammates. These experiences illustrate how gender bias continues to shape communication and decision-making within virtual communities, even when inclusivity is a stated value.

This research aims to investigate how female players in the KLG Team who experience sexism construct their self-concept within the gaming community. The central research question is: *How do female PUBG Mobile players within KLG Team who face sexist behavior develop their self-concept through social interaction?* To explore this phenomenon, the study applies Symbolic Interactionism Theory, which provides a framework for understanding how individuals create meaning through communication and social interaction.

Symbolic Interactionism, originally developed by George Herbert Mead and later formalized by Herbert Blumer, posits that individuals interpret and respond to symbols—such as language, gestures, and expressions—based on shared meanings (Ilawatus Z, 2017; Anggraini, 2015; Pramesty, 2021b). Through these interactions, people construct their self-concept, which evolves as they engage with others in social contexts. Widiarti (2017) and Riswandi (2013) emphasize that self-concept emerges from interpersonal communication and reflects an individual's psychological, social, and physical self-perception. Over time, self-

concept becomes more complex as cognitive and emotional maturity develop, influencing how individuals perceive their own identity (Wijayanti & Astiti, 2017).

Within gaming communities, these symbolic interactions occur through verbal and non-verbal cues such as chat messages, voice communication, and gameplay behavior. Female players' experiences of recognition or exclusion contribute to how they view themselves within the community. When they are dismissed or underestimated, it can negatively affect their self-concept and confidence. Conversely, positive reinforcement and equitable interaction can strengthen their self-perception and sense of belonging.

The term *community* originates from the Latin word *communitas*, meaning "a group of people" or "public" (Wahid & Fauzan, 2021). In the digital era, online or virtual communities function as social spaces where individuals with shared interests—such as gaming—interact and collaborate (Egziabher & Edwards, 2013). As Putri (2018) notes, communities embody cooperation among individuals toward shared goals, whether or not they are geographically bound. In this sense, KLG Team represents a virtual community that transcends physical boundaries, fostering both social relationships and identity formation among its members.

In summary, the growing participation of women in online gaming has challenged traditional gender norms but also revealed persistent barriers rooted in sexism and stereotyping. PUBG Mobile, as a highly interactive and competitive platform, provides a valuable context to examine how female gamers navigate these challenges and construct their identities within male-dominated spaces. By applying Symbolic Interactionism Theory, this research seeks to understand how communication patterns, symbolic meanings, and social interactions shape the self-concept of female gamers in the KLG Team community. The study also contributes to broader discussions about gender equality, representation, and empowerment in digital gaming cultures.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research method to explore the construction of self-concept among female PUBG Mobile players who experience sexism within the KLG Team online gaming community. According to Kriyantono (2022), qualitative research aims to describe and explain phenomena in depth through systematic data collection. It prioritizes the quality and depth of data rather than the quantity of participants, as the goal is to uncover rich and detailed insights into the studied phenomenon. Once the data collected sufficiently explains the observed issue, additional subjects are unnecessary. This method enables the researcher to understand how messages—in this case, the interactions among players—are articulated and interpreted, thereby shaping a shared social reality.

Bogdan and Biklen (1992) define qualitative research as a process that generates descriptive data in the form of words, speech, and observable behaviors of individuals. This method is suitable for uncovering complex social meanings derived from personal experiences, interactions, and community contexts (Rahmat, 2009). Similarly, Sugiyono (2013) emphasizes that research subjects and objects represent specific attributes, characteristics, or values of individuals, groups, or phenomena selected for study and analysis (Tanujaya, 2017a). The selection of informants in qualitative research depends on factors such as data richness, precision, analytical depth, time, and resource availability (Samsu, 2017).

The object of this research is the online game *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* (PUBG) Mobile, while the subjects are female members of the *KLG Team* community. The selection criteria for informants include: (1) being female, (2) aged 18–25 years, (3) university students or employees, and (4) active PUBG Mobile players for at least one year. These criteria ensure that participants have sufficient gaming experience and self-awareness to provide meaningful reflections on sexism and identity within the gaming environment.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation analysis. As defined by Riyanto (2010), an interview is a technique used to gather data through direct communication between the researcher and the informant. Afifuddin (2009) adds that interviews aim to elicit information about informants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations regarding specific phenomena. In this study, in-depth interviews allowed participants to share personal narratives and emotional responses related to their interactions in the KLG Team community.

The researcher also conducted participant observation, directly engaging with the community to observe interactions and behaviors. As explained by Sugiyono (2017), observation is a complex psychological process involving perception and memory. Participant observation enables researchers to gain firsthand understanding of gender-based communication and symbolic interactions within the gaming context. Additionally, documentation techniques were employed to collect supporting materials, such as screenshots, chat transcripts, and archival records, to validate data obtained from interviews and observations (Sugiyono, 2017).

For data analysis, this study applies the interactive model by Miles and Huberman (in Denzin & Lincoln, 2009), which involves three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Triangulation was used to ensure validity, combining data from interviews, observations, and documentation. Through this process, the researcher aimed to build a comprehensive and credible interpretation of how female PUBG Mobile players construct their self-concept amidst experiences of gender-based discrimination in online gaming communities.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study involved four informants who are members of the KLG TEAM, an all-female player community of *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds (PUBG) Mobile*. Through in-depth interviews, the study explores how these women construct self-concept, negotiate gendered stereotypes, and interpret their experiences within a gaming culture often regarded as male-dominated. The four informants—Devina Ismira, Eka Wulandari, Putri Dwyningtyas, and Chika—represent active female gamers with varying experiences and motivations for playing PUBG Mobile.

Profiles of Informants

The first informant, Devina Ismira (Vina), aged 25, is the leader of the KLG TEAM and a professional employee in Jakarta. She has been an active PUBG Mobile player since 2018 (Season 2). As both a leader and a veteran player, Vina frequently participates in tournaments, community events, and invests in purchasing in-game items such as outfits and accessories. Her leadership role positions her as a significant voice in understanding how women assert authority in a gaming community shaped by masculine norms.

The second informant, Eka Wulandari, aged 22, holds a Bachelor's degree in Communication Studies from Bhayangkara University. Known as *KLG ● uCanToo* in the game, she joined the community in 2019 and consistently engages in "push rank" sessions—an activity focused on increasing player rankings. Eka's experience as a communication graduate provides valuable insight into how media literacy and self-presentation influence gender perception in virtual spaces.

The third informant, Putri Dwyningtyas, aged 20, is a university student and an active member of KLG TEAM since 2019 (Season 5). Known in-game as *PUTxAUL*, she has achieved the highest tier ranking in PUBG Mobile. Her experiences reflect the younger generation's growing participation in digital and competitive gaming, while also highlighting how women navigate toxic or gendered environments in online spaces.

The fourth informant, Chika (Uwu), aged 23, works at a local restaurant in Yogyakarta and plays PUBG Mobile actively since 2018. Known as *KLG ● iCanToo*, she is a dedicated player who has consistently reached top-tier rankings. Her story represents working-class female gamers who use mobile gaming as a form of leisure, competition, and self-expression.

Gender Stereotypes and Sexism in Gaming

PUBG Mobile is often perceived as a masculine game because of its *battle royale* and *survival-adventure* themes. Within this cultural context, the informants consistently reported experiences of sexism and gender stereotyping from both teammates and opponents. Male players often assumed that female players were weaker, less skilled, or liabilities to their teams—a finding consistent with Balqis (2022), who notes that sexism in online gaming frequently manifests through assumptions of female inferiority and unsuitability for competitive play.

However, this gender-based stigma has also served as a motivational trigger for these women. Rather than withdrawing from gaming communities, they use the negative perception as a challenge to prove their competence and to dismantle the assumption that gaming prowess is inherently male. As Devina (Informant 1) explained, being underestimated motivated her to master strategies and improve her reflexes, transforming prejudice into personal achievement.

This finding resonates with the notion of symbolic resistance, where marginalized groups reclaim agency through participation and skill demonstration in environments that exclude them (Shaw, 2014). The female gamers in this study do not passively accept sexist behavior but instead construct alternative forms of recognition, asserting that gender does not determine gaming ability.

Self-Concept Formation and Symbolic Interaction

To further understand this dynamic, the findings were analyzed through the lens of symbolic interactionism, particularly the triadic relationship between *mind*, *self*, and *society* (Blumer, 1969). The "mind" represents the cognitive dimension—how the female players interpret meanings and motivations in playing PUBG Mobile. The "self" reflects their self-concept—how they perceive themselves as competent or inadequate players. The "society" aspect represents their social interactions and the symbolic meanings attached to being a "female gamer" in a predominantly male gaming culture.

Mind: Motivation and Initial Engagement

Each informant's motivation to play PUBG Mobile was distinct. Devina started playing out of curiosity and a desire for leadership within a gaming community. Eka played as a way to bond with her peers and express competitiveness. Putri was motivated by both social connection and personal enjoyment of challenge, while Chika viewed the game as a form of escape from routine work life.

These motivations reflect what Yee (2006) categorized as the *achievement, social, and immersion* components of gaming motivation. For these women, the act of playing PUBG Mobile transcends entertainment—it becomes a means of developing focus, confidence, and self-efficacy in a digital arena historically dominated by male players.

Self: Negotiating Self-Perception

In constructing their self-concept, all four informants exhibited different levels of self-assessment. Vina and Eka considered themselves skilled players capable of competing with men. In contrast, Putri and Chika admitted feeling technically limited due to device quality or

lack of in-game resources. Despite these differences, each expressed a sense of pride and belonging in the KLG TEAM community.

This aligns with Brooks's concept of self-concept as cited in Rakhmat (Ismiati, 2018), which posits that self-concept emerges through individual perception of oneself in psychological, physical, and social dimensions based on interactional experiences. Negative interactions—such as mockery or exclusion—initially induced anxiety and self-doubt among the players. Yet, through repeated interactions and recognition from other female teammates, they reconstructed positive self-definitions as competent and resilient gamers.

Society: Interaction, Stigma, and Resistance

The societal element of symbolic interactionism is most visible in the informants' interactions with other players. The women described facing gender-based mockery, particularly when their voices were identified as female during in-game chats. Some opponents made sexist jokes or refused to take them seriously as team members. Such experiences mirror prior findings by Fox and Tang (2017), who observed that women in online gaming often experience "ambient sexism" through subtle yet pervasive verbal and behavioral cues.

Despite these challenges, the informants highlighted how belonging to the KLG TEAM provided emotional support and empowerment. Within this female-centered gaming subculture, members reinforce each other's confidence, celebrate small victories, and share coping strategies against online harassment. This mirrors the role of subcultural bonding as described by Williams (2007), where marginalized groups create safe communal spaces that affirm shared identities and resist hegemonic norms.

The Interplay of Symbolic Interaction and Gendered Identity

Through the continuous cycle of action and interpretation, the informants transform external stigmatization into internal affirmation. Their *mind* interprets negative experiences as challenges; their *self* adjusts to reinforce self-worth; and their *society*—in the form of the KLG TEAM—provides validation. This dynamic interplay highlights the fluid and negotiated nature of identity in digital environments.

The study also underscores that gender identity in gaming is performative rather than fixed. Female players simultaneously conform to and challenge gender expectations through their gameplay styles, communication, and team leadership. Their performances—whether competitive, humorous, or nurturing—become forms of symbolic expression that reconfigure what it means to be a "female gamer" (Butler, 1990).

Furthermore, the use of online games as a medium of self-expression parallels the concept of *digital embodiment* (Taylor, 2018), where avatars and virtual performances become extensions of the players' real-world identities. By achieving high ranks, leading teams, or purchasing exclusive items, these women assert symbolic ownership of a digital space that often marginalizes them.

Psychological and Social Implications

The interviews revealed mixed emotional experiences. On one hand, sexism and ridicule created psychological strain, leading to anxiety and diminished confidence. On the other hand, achieving success and recognition within their teams fostered empowerment and resilience. As Chika noted, "Every time someone says girls can't play, I just play better." This statement exemplifies the process of identity reinforcement through oppositional performance—a key mechanism in symbolic interaction where meaning emerges through social contrast.

Such experiences suggest that female gamers are not merely passive consumers but active meaning-makers who reshape the symbolic structure of digital gaming culture. Their self-concept evolves from vulnerability to empowerment, demonstrating how agency can emerge even within restrictive gender frameworks.

Collective Empowerment and Social Change

Beyond individual empowerment, the presence of all-female communities such as KLG TEAM represents a broader movement toward inclusivity in gaming culture. By organizing tournaments, sharing strategies, and maintaining visibility in online forums, they challenge the male monopoly over digital competitive spaces. This collective agency contributes to reshaping social meanings associated with gender and digital play (Consalvo, 2012).

The study also finds that the KLG TEAM operates as both a support system and a cultural counterspace. It allows women to reclaim pleasure in play, reduce isolation, and normalize female participation in competitive gaming. These processes collectively advance a cultural shift toward gender equity in virtual environments.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that female PUBG Mobile players in the KLG TEAM navigate gender-based challenges through a process of symbolic interaction that reshapes their self-concept and social identity. Sexism and stereotyping within the gaming community serve as catalysts for empowerment, encouraging women to redefine femininity and competence in digital play. Through continuous interaction, self-reflection, and support from fellow players, these women develop resilience and confidence that transcend the boundaries of online gaming. The KLG TEAM functions as a counterspace where members reclaim agency and visibility, illustrating that gender equality in gaming can emerge through collective empowerment and mutual validation. In essence, the players' experiences highlight how female gamers are not passive participants but active agents of cultural change who challenge and transform the symbolic meanings of gender in digital environments.

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