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Moving beyond “Us” versus “Them”: Social identities in digital gaming

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Gender and Gaming

Digital gaming contexts are reported often to cultivate prejudiced attitudes and behaviours towards females, typically relating to negative stereotypes about their perceived competence in gaming. Specifically, digital gaming is often considered stereotypically to be a “male activity” (Paaßen, Morgenroth, & Stratemeyer, 2017; Taylor, Jenson, & De Castell, 2009) and consequently research has shown that females are deemed less competent players relative to their male counterparts, even in the presence of competence indicators (Ivory, Fox, Waddell, & Ivory, 2014). Such prevailing attitudes raise substantial concern, particularly when considering that females report receiving verbal abuse from male players when playing online multi-player games, and have often represented themselves as male to alleviate such experiences (Kuznekoff & Rose, 2013; Hussain & Griffiths, 2008). In the absence of hostility, females recount that gaming can provide immensely rewarding experiences through its capacity to provide social interaction, team work, mastery and exploration (Taylor, 2003).

Clearly, exploring ways to ameliorate negative experiences for female players is important as this may help to encourage greater participation in gameplay; a domain which has been shown to increase access to Science, Technology and Engineering subjects (STEM; Lewis & Griffiths, 2011; Paaßen et al., 2017). This article will therefore focus on two prominent social psychological theories: First, Social Identity Theory (SIT; Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) may help us to understand how in-group and out-group categorisation is formed, and how prejudice may emerge through perceptions of “us” versus “them”. Second, we will explore the framework of Multiple Social Identities (Rydell, McConnell, & Beilock, 2009), which may proffer a potential practical strategy to alleviate the effects of discrimination for females by allowing them to identify with an alternative positive group identity.

How do negative stereotypes emerge? Insights from Social Identity Theory

SIT provides a lens through which to explain intergroup processes such as stereotyping and discrimination. The core principle of SIT posits that an individual's sense of identity is framed by their affiliation to social groups. In addition to a sense of personal identity (i.e., own attributes and values), people also occupy a social identity, in which they appraise themselves relative to the strength of their group memberships. In this way, an individual's social identity serves as a reference point that enables them to compare similarities and differences with other "in-group" relative to "out-group" members (Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994). In the case of gaming, a player may hold their "gamer" identity with high regard and this may merge with their positive self-concept (Hogg & Abrams, 1990). Therefore, an individual's sense of self-esteem may be maintained through positive group affiliation and identity (Swann et al., 2009). Further to this, a "gamer" identity may manifest itself more specifically, for example, in reference to specific gaming groups or communities (Grooten, & Kowert, 2015). Based on group categorisation, however, differences between the in-group (e.g., female) and out-group (e.g., male) can become accentuated, and intricate differences between members of the same social category (e.g., other females) may be overlooked. This can lead to the process of stereotyping whereby between-group differences are perceived as large and within-group differences small (Tajfel, 1981). This "meta-contrast" influences a range of behaviour, such as prejudice and discrimination (Hall, Crisp, & Suen, 2009), both of which may be experienced in stereotype-salient environments (McGarty et al., 2002).

In the case of gamer identity, the distinction between in-groups and out-groups may explain the observed prejudice often held towards female players, in which they may arguably be perceived as the "out-group" relative to their male counterparts (given the typical conception of gaming being "male space"). Herein lies an issue, particularly given the extant literature

highlighting the prevalence of intergroup hostility and associated discriminatory behaviours between in-group and out-group members (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy & Flament, 1971). If discrimination towards females in gaming communities is as a result of this intergroup categorisation process, then clearly a solution is required. One such solution may be to ensure that “gamer” identity is broadened so that gender categorisation is no longer a salient concern; a strategy we now turn to.

Reducing stereotypes and their impacts

The MSI framework (Rydell et al., 2009) suggests that individuals possess various distinct social identities that are activated or inhibited depending on one’s current situation. Here, identity is viewed as fluid and context-dependent, suggesting it may be operationalised within gaming communities with two main objectives; 1), to reduce the likelihood of intergroup discrimination towards females in the first place and 2), to reduce the psychological impacts of stereotypical behaviours should they occur towards females. The former of these refers to the process of “social comparison”, a key facet of SIT in which individuals assess the worth of groups by comparing their relative features (Tajfel, 1978). In the case of MSI, the main objective is to shift identity salience from a stigmatised identity (e.g., “female identity”) to an alternative identity which holds positive implications (e.g., “gamer identity”) thereby reducing negative gender-related comparisons that may underpin intergroup discrimination. The latter of these objectives refers to “social identification” whereby MSI can encourage females to capitalise on their “gamer identity” which, in the case of them experiencing gender-based discrimination, is a more favourable aspect of their identity. As such, MSI is a useful mechanism to operationalise a positive identity for female players experiencing stigmatisation.

The benefits of a “gamer identity” for females is that categorisation based on gender becomes less salient, and this positive identity may reduce any negative psychological impacts

on one's sense of self (Davies, Spencer & Steele, 2005; Mussweiler, Gabriel, & Bodenhausen, 2000). Indeed, this principle has been found to be effective for alleviating negative gender-related stereotypes and bolstering female gamers' performance (Kaye & Pennington, 2016). This may be because identifying with a superordinate social identity, which carries positive performance implications, minimises females' ruminations over negative gender stereotypes pertaining to their gaming competence.

Understanding superordinate identity within the context of digital gaming may not only have a positive impact upon female players themselves on a psychological level, but may also serve to benefit gaming communities more widely. Gaming environments that avoid gender-based categorisation of players by promoting superordinate gamer identity might reduce the likelihood of inter-gender discrimination, and may be instrumental in developing online communities. One pragmatic approach to this may be to reduce gender cues within the gaming environment through the development of more non-gender attributable or androgynous avatars (Behm-Morwitz & Mastro, 2009; Kaye, Gresty & Stubbs-Ennis, in press). Avatars may therefore be promoting gender-related categorisations, thus supporting the SIT processes of social categorisation, which may have adverse impacts on females' experiences in gameplay. Further, a similar implication could be discussed in respect of non-gender identifiable gamer-tags or usernames that may reduce the likelihood of stereotypical attributions being made (Pittinsky, Shih & Trahan, 2006).

Future Research Directions

Although SIT and MSI are well established in the core social psychological literature, there are additional utilities to be gained when applying these frameworks to explore gender stereotyping in sub-domains of gaming. Specifically, it is known that female representation

varies between gaming domains (Casual Games Association, 2007), and some gaming communities may be more collegial than others in their approach to promoting harmonisation across players (Blackburn & Kwak, 2014). As such, more research is required to establish the efficacy of these frameworks across a wider range of sub-domains of gaming (e.g., those which represent hard-core, more extensive gaming behaviours vs. casual or lighter forms of gaming). Similarly, gaming group affiliations may differ in strength between different types of games and it is recommended that researchers explore gender stereotyping and experiences within sub-types of gaming, rather than taking a holistic approach to gaming in general. To date, much work on social identity in this domain pertains to online multiplayer games (Kaye, Kowert & Quinn, 2017; Kuznekoff & Rose, 2013) and less is known about how transferable the salience of gamer identity may be between online and offline contexts.

Finally, we acknowledge that we have focused on the individual repression of identity – a strategy proposed by SIT to alleviate group stigmatisation. It is worth noting, however, that even if superordinate forms of gamer identity are established, there may be other regressive sub-group identities which may be interdependently related. This may make it difficult to establish superordinate identity in such a discrete way (Bianchi, Mummendey, Steffens & Yzerbyt, 2010). Future research may therefore benefit from examining other facets of SIT to reduce gender stereotyping in gaming, such as strategies underpinned by social creativity (transforming the meaning of the group), and social competition (resistance and competition against the out-group).

Conclusion

This article discusses the fruitful applications of social psychological theories in developing our understanding of why female gamers may be subject to discriminatory behaviour in digital communities, and the likely psychological impacts of this. We propose that capitalising on the

MSI framework may proffer promising strategies to reduce the harmful impacts of gender stereotypes for female players and promote more positive gaming experiences. These insights may also be applied to wider issues beyond female players in digital gaming environments, for example, females within STEM-related domains, or males in traditionally-female pursuits such as nursing and education. The MSI approach can therefore present a potentially effective intervention to buffer individuals and stigmatised groups from the negative impact of stereotypes and discriminatory behaviours across a range of domains that still uphold gender-associated stereotypes and expectancies.

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