

From Gaze to Gameplay: A Typology of Motivations for Male Gender Swapping in Online Games.

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INTRODUCTION

Shared gaming spaces offer the opportunity for people to connect worldwide. They are highly social environments in which players interact in many ways, either through competition or cooperation (Wang et al., 2023). Video games even offer opportunities for socially inhibited individuals to connect to others more easily (Kowert et al., 2014). Most of the social interactions in video games are conducted with avatars, which serve as both a visual representation of the players as well as a means of facilitating manipulation of the virtual world (Szolin et al., 2023). Avatars in video games can either be chosen from a list of possibilities or created entirely by the players. Motivations to choose certain types of avatars have been studied, especially from a gender perspective (e.g. Dunn & Guadagno, 2012). These motivations often include identity expression, identity exploration and change (Fox, 2013). Amongst the practices of avatar creation, gender swapping (e.g. a male gamer playing a female character) in video games is a common practice (Zheng & Li, 2025). However, surprisingly no research has extensively explored existing motivations for gender swapping practices from the players' perspective.

Gender swapping occurs frequently in video games context (Zhou et al., 2022). This phenomenon can be explained by the dramaturgical analysis of social interaction by Goffman (1959). The core idea of the dramaturgical analysis is that individuals are actors performing on a stage when they are interacting, and that they are actively managing the impression they make on an audience. His framework posits a fundamental dichotomy between the front stage, where individuals perform socially accepted roles and manage impressions, and the backstage, a private region where they can drop the performance and prepare. While Goffman's dramaturgical model has been enormously influential in theorizing social performance, its binary division between front stage and backstage is increasingly inadequate for mediated contexts. In particular, online spaces such as multiplayer games constitute a *hybrid stage*: a dramaturgical region that is simultaneously public and buffered, where individuals can enact experimental performances of self with mitigated risk (Boellstorff, 2015). Unlike the front stage, hybrid stages allow for transgression and identity play without enduring social sanction, yet unlike the backstage, they are directed toward an audience and elicit consequential feedback. This hybrid stage therefore provides a crucial site for testing and transforming self representations in late modern digital life.

Existing research has only focused on distinct potential motivations for gender swapping, such as gender affirmation and exploration (McKenna et al., 2024). However, to this date, nothing is known about the overall motivations behind gender swapping, as well as their effects of lasting gender swapping practices in video games on real life attitudes and behaviours. Gender swapping being mostly done by male gamers impersonating female characters in online environments where interactions are still gender dependent (Dill & Thill, 2007) one could

expect that such practices could lead to modification in gender roles perception. Moreover, video games being an environment where sexism is common and where masculine norms are the norm (Fox & Tang, 2014), different gender swapping motivations could be associated with different levels of gender bias. The video game industry at large could therefore benefit from understanding motivations for gender swapping, in order to provide a safer environment for all players, independent of their gender.

Therefore, with this research, we want to test explore the impact of gender swapping for male gamers. More precisely, we want to explore if, in virtual environments which are known to be males-dominated environment where sexism persist and in which women are portrayed in sexist ways (e.g. Fox & Tang, 2014). Then, building on existing work on motivation by Ryan and Deci (2000) and on work on the Proteus effect (Liu, 2023), we aim to build a typology of motivation for gender swapping along two axes: Instrumental versus Autotelic motivation, and Objectification of the avatar versus Subjectification. Instrumental motivations can be seen as forms of extrinsic motivation (achieving a separate outcome like a competitive advantage or social gifts), while autotelic motivations align with intrinsic motivation (the activity is its own reward, e.g., for aesthetic appreciation, immersion, or role-playing). Objectification involves treating the avatar as an object for one's own use or gaze. Subjectification involves identifying with the avatar as a subject or experiencing the world through it. Finally, the last objective is to theorise how the identified motivational patterns may affect predict real-world gender bias.

STUDY

In this study, we use BERTopic (Grootendorst, 2022) to extract key dimensions from unstructured forum discussions. Text mining is common in marketing research (e.g. Oh et al., 2023). Marketing scholars often resort to Latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA; Blei et al., 2003) when conducting text mining. However, despite its advantages, LDA techniques also show many limitations. LDA uses a ‘bag of word’ technique, which does not consider distance between words when analysing text data. LDA also requires a lot of manual reprocessing with the dataset, including standardization, tokenization, stemming and stop word removal, which are steps that can negatively impact the quality of the analysis. BERTopic, on the other hand is an advanced deep learning-based topic modelling technique that uses transformer models to analysis textual data (Grootendorst, 2022). Recent research has highlighted the superiority of BERTopic compared to LDA models when identifying and capturing contextual relationships between words (Oh et al., 2023).

BERTopic uses a 5 steps process to analyse textual data. First, the algorithm creates embeddings with a transformer model, traditionally SBERT and the “All-MiniLM-L6-V2” sentence transformer model. This step allows to convert our documents into numerical representations. These numerical representations are then sorted in terms of dimensionality with a clustering algorithm. Bert uses the UMAP algorithm to sort the embeddings and reduce the dimensionality of the dataset. After reducing the dimensionality, BERTopic clusters them with another model: HDBSCAN. Then, once the clusters are established, vectorizers are used to create topic representations. Finally, the class-based TF-IDF representation is used to

extract keywords.

After collecting data from Reddit and dedicated discussions on distinct subreddits (e.g. r/gaming, r/AskGames) using the Reddit API, we identified 17k comments that were composed of 44228 sentences. All data were collected from subreddits where the topic was playing female avatars for male gamers. The sentence split was done following recommendation from Grootendorst (2022), and sentences were then subject to the analysis. We used BERTopic to identify potential topics related to motivations for gender swapping. The 100 initial topics were manually inspected by the author(s) to identify themes directly related to the player's reasons for choosing an avatar's gender. Topics related to game mechanics, technical issues, or other irrelevant discussions were discarded. The remaining 28 topics were then consolidated into 11 distinct motivational categories based on thematic similarity.: social gift, competitive advantage, role-playing, aesthetic customization, social interaction, novelty, immersion, escapism, sexualization, aesthetic appreciation, gender alignment (see Table 1 for a description of the topic).

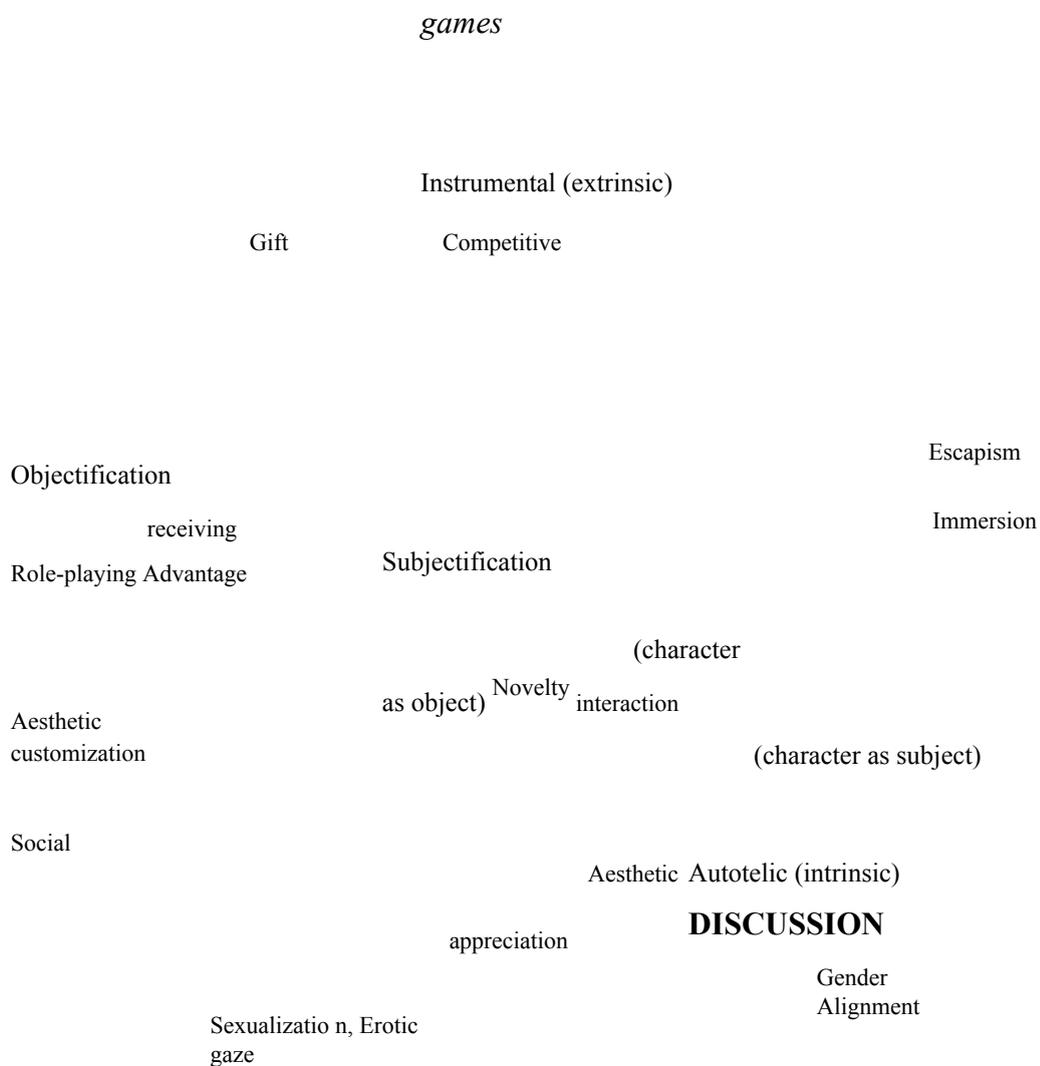
Table 1: Overview of the motivations for male gender swapping

Motivation Description	Reference (if available)	Supporting
Aesthetic appreciation	to customize the character are more appealing for the opposite gender	avatar that reflects more accurately their gender
Aesthetic customization	The design of the character allows the gamer to obtain a competitive advantage compared to the others (e.g. Females avatars are smaller and have a smaller hitbox)	Chou et al. (2014)
Competitive Advantage		
Escapism	Willingness of the user to experience something that is completely out of the real world, an experience that allows them to escape reality	McKenna et al. (2024) ; Zhang & Li (2025)
Gender alignment	Willingness of the user to play an	
Aesthetic preferences for some general appearance over others.		
Opportunities offered by the game		
Gift receiving	Portraying other gender may allow players to receive in-game gift from others	Chou et al. (2014)
Immersion	Characteristics of the character allow for more immersion into the design / story / interactions	
Novelty	Allows to experience things differently, with new interactions, new elements	Paik & Shi (2013)
Role-playing	Role-playing allows the players to experiment and live an experience as somebody else, with other values, other ideas, and potentially other genders	The physics of the avatars, mostly the exacerbated female features are the primary
Sexualization, erotic gaze		

Social interaction Allows to experience social interaction, chat with others,
without necessarily gift giving. Chou et al. (2014)

Then, we conducted a content analysis of the topic names and original review samples, selecting those that were related to motivations for gender swapping. For each topic, a sample of the representative documents were chosen and manually analysed. This analysis allowed us to better understand each motivation, and to build our typology (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Typology of gender swapping practices in video



The typology proposed here provides an overview of motivations for gender swapping in video games. It also allows us to identify potential consequences of these motivations in terms of gender bias. More precisely, because instrumental-objectification motivations reinforce the perception of female-presenting entities as tools to be manipulated for personal gain (e.g., smaller hitboxes, receiving gifts), one could expect such motivations to have a negative impact on gender bias. Meanwhile, autotelic-subjectification motivations may foster perspective-taking. By embodying a female avatar for reasons of immersion or role-playing, a player may be exposed to different social interactions which could theoretically increase empathy and challenge pre-existing biases. The typology offered here could help game designers and developers in their willingness to develop more inclusive online spaces through game design and game mechanisms. It could also help researchers exploring online communities and gender bias in video games.

Future research could build on this typology to quantitatively measure gender bias associated with the motivations highlighted in that typology. This could be done by recruiting participants online, exploring their in-game behaviour, and measuring their gender bias with IAT tests (Rezaei, 2011). Future research could also adopt a purely ethnographic (Kozinets, 2015) approach to dive into the mechanisms of gender swapping in the hybrid spaces that video games are.

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