

EXPLORING GENDER ROLES IN MOBILE LEGENDS: A STUDY OF WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN ONLINE GAMES

Arif Rizki ZURRIANSYAH¹, Susiyanto SUSIYANTO², Lesti HERIYANTI³

^{1,2,3}Sociology Study Program, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Muhammadiyah University of Bengkulu, Indonesia

Corresponding author: Arif Rizki Zurriansyah

E-mail: arifrizki020202@gmail.com

Volume: 6
Number: 4
Page: 836 - 844

Article History:

Received: 2025-06-07

Revised: 2025-06-24

Accepted: 2025-07-17

Abstract:

This study aims to explore women's involvement in the game Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB) from the perspective of their subjective experiences. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, this study involved eight female informants who actively play MLBB and have social experiences within the gaming community. The results show that women play four main roles: as active and strategic players, recipients of gender pressure, agents of resistance and adaptation, and representative symbols within the community. Despite facing various forms of discrimination and symbolic violence, the informants are able to navigate these challenges through contextual strategies of resistance and adaptation. These findings support theories of social construction and gender performativity and emphasize the importance of digital space as an arena for negotiating gender identity.

Keywords: Gender, Online Games, Mobile Legends, Symbolic Violence, Digital Sociology, Female Gamers

INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology has brought about a major transformation in the entertainment sector, particularly in the world of online games (Ndun, 2024). Mobile gaming has now become one of the most popular digital activities across all ages and genders. One game that has gained extraordinary popularity is Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB), which not only offers strategy-based competitions but also forms a large-scale virtual social community. Globally, MLBB has been downloaded more than 1 billion times and is one of the most popular mobile esports internationally. This phenomenon has also reached Indonesia, where MLBB has a very large and active player base, including among teenagers and young adults. However, within this euphoria, there are often hidden issues in the dynamics of digital social interactions: the unequal representation and treatment of female players. In what should be an open and inclusive space, gender bias still exists, reflecting the virtual reproduction of patriarchal norms.

Women's involvement in the world of online gaming, particularly MLBB, has not yet fully achieved a safe and equal space. Women who play MLBB often experience marginalization in the form of stereotypes, exclusion, and even verbal harassment by fellow players, both directly through voice chat and indirectly through text comments (Pratama & Sodik, 2022). Based on findings by Fikrih & Herna (2025), the majority of female gamers in Indonesia admitted to having received sexist comments or being belittled for being deemed incompetent simply because of their gender identity. These experiences not only reflect inequality but also hinder women's active participation in the gaming ecosystem. They often feel the need to hide their gender identity to avoid discriminatory treatment. Some even choose to stop playing competitively due to the psychological pressure it causes. This situation demonstrates that female gamers face not only technical challenges in gaming but also social pressures not experienced by male players.

Culturally, online games like MLBB are not just a means of entertainment, but also an arena for social interaction that concretely demonstrates gender construction. In this digital space, various



social values and traditional gender norms are often reproduced unfiltered, even tending to be freed from conventional social controls due to the anonymity of the virtual world. It makes female gamers vulnerable to labeling and biased treatment, especially when they openly express their gender identity. In the Indonesian context, a society still strongly rooted in normative gender views reinforces the stigma that gaming is a "male" activity, while women who participate are considered deviant or unnatural. As a result, women's participation in MLBB is not just about interest or skill, but also a struggle to redefine space and identity in the virtual world.

Women's experiences in MLBB are not homogeneous and are strongly influenced by each individual's coping strategies (Whildania, 2025). Some players choose to remain active and bravely confront unpleasant treatment through confrontational means, such as responding to comments or reporting harassing players. However, others choose defensive strategies by disguising their identities, avoiding direct communication, or even stopping playing in public mode. These findings suggest various patterns of resistance and assimilation that are interesting to examine further from a lived experience perspective. In this regard, female identity is not simply a biological category but also a social construct negotiated through interactions and gaming experiences. Therefore, understanding women's experiences in MLBB requires an approach that captures the complexity of their social and psychological dynamics, often hidden behind game screens and digital avatars.

Despite growing interest in the study of women in gaming, there is still little research explicitly exploring the subjective experiences and meanings women experience in games like MLBB in Indonesia. Many previous studies have focused on the visual representation of female characters or the phenomenon of sexualization in game design. Meanwhile, studies on women's actual experiences as direct actors in the online gaming ecosystem are still very limited, especially in the local context. This gap indicates a significant literature gap, particularly in answering questions about how women experience, respond to, and understand social interactions that occur in competitive games dominated by male players. However, from a digital sociology perspective, women's experiences in virtual spaces like MLBB can reflect dynamics of power and resistance that are relevant to the discussion within the framework of gender justice and digital inclusion.

Beyond the social aspects, the importance of this research also lies in its accompanying cultural implications. The gaming world is not just a platform for entertainment, but also a medium for conveying values and representations that have the potential to shape public perceptions of gender. The representation of women in games and their communities can impact how society views women's roles in general. If women are consistently reduced to the butt of jokes or deemed competitively incompetent, this will reinforce long-standing negative stereotypes. Conversely, if women's experiences and voices in gaming begin to receive attention and recognition, it will create opportunities for the creation of a more just and equal digital space. Therefore, exploring the narratives of women who play MLBB is not merely a documentary effort, but also part of a symbolic struggle to expand the scope of women's representation in digital culture.

Various field reports and testimonies appearing in online forums, social media, and personal interviews demonstrate that female gamers have unique perspectives and experiences within the gaming world, which has traditionally been constructed in a masculine manner. They experience identity dilemmas, inner conflicts, and social adaptation processes that are rarely addressed by quantitative studies. This situation underscores the need for an exploratory and in-depth qualitative approach that captures social realities holistically and goes beyond statistics. Thus, this research will not only provide a factual picture of women's involvement in MLBB but will also reveal how women interpret digital spaces, respond to social pressures, and shape identities amidst the dominance of

virtual gender structures. This perspective is crucial for enriching academic and policy discourse on gender inclusion in digital technology and media.

Based on this background, this study aims to explore women's involvement in the game Mobile Legends from the perspective of their subjective experiences. The study focuses on understanding how women experience social interactions in the game, the forms of discrimination they face, and the strategies they use to adapt to or resist these situations. This research is expected to provide theoretical contributions to enrich the study of gender and digital culture, as well as practical contributions for game developers, the gaming community, and policymakers in creating a more inclusive and gender-equitable gaming ecosystem. The results of this study are also relevant to the world of education, particularly in the context of digital literacy, character education, and curriculum development that is responsive to issues of equality in virtual spaces. By exploring women's voices and experiences in MLBB, this study aims to open up a space for critical discussion regarding the right to a safe, equal, and meaningful digital space for all genders.

Online Games as a Digital Social Space. Online games have evolved into a digital social space brimming with interaction and cultural dynamics (Taylor, 2006; Consalvo, 2012). In this context, games like Mobile Legends: Bang Bang are not simply a form of entertainment, but rather a social medium where symbols, norms, and values are exchanged. Players not only compete technically but also engage in communication and identity negotiation, both explicitly and implicitly. This virtual space creates an ecosystem that facilitates the formation of communities, social hierarchies, and relational dynamics between individuals across backgrounds. In other words, games become a platform for secondary socialization processes that often reflect existing social structures in the real world.

Digital sociology views virtual spaces, such as online games, as an extension of conventional social interactions. In competitive games, players interact through text, voice, and avatars that represent their identities. It creates conditions in which social constructs such as gender, class, and power can emerge in new forms while remaining ideologically charged. When technology mediates social relations, symbolic domination can occur in subtle, sometimes unconscious, ways.

Gender and Participation in Online Gaming. Although the number of women in the gaming community continues to increase, they continue to face various cultural and social barriers (Fox & Tang, 2014; Gray, 2014). Female gamers are often considered "guests" in a world historically constructed as masculine. It is reflected in the stereotype that true gamers are men, while women are merely "followers." This view influences women's experiences in the gaming world, which is rife with bias and prejudice. They are often doubted, belittled, and even disproportionately criticized when they compete or perform well in matches.

In this context, women's involvement is not just about playing, but also about striving for recognition and safe spaces (Shaw, 2012; Kafai et al., 2016). Online games like MLBB demonstrate that participation is not a neutral process; rather, it is fraught with structural and symbolic challenges. When women publicly express their presence, they are potentially the target of sexist comments or exclusion within the team.

Gender Roles in Online Gaming Spaces. In the context of digital spaces like Mobile Legends, the gender roles played by women exhibit complex and non-uniform variations. Based on various studies and field observations, these roles can be classified into four main forms: first, the role of active and strategic players, where women not only participate but also take on key positions in team decision-making; second, the role of recipients of gender pressure, reflecting a subordinate position shaped by stereotypes and biases in the gaming community; third, the role of agents of resistance and adaptation, which refers to how women respond to pressure through resistive actions



or contextual coping strategies; and fourth, the role of social bridges and representative symbols, where their presence opens up new spaces for other women's involvement in digital culture. These four forms of role are important to understand because they demonstrate that women are not merely passive objects but also active subjects negotiating their social positions within gaming spaces rife with power relations.

Symbolic Violence and Sexism in Gaming. One of the main obstacles women face in the world of online gaming is forms of symbolic violence, both verbal and non-verbal. Derogatory comments, sexist jokes, and social exclusion within teams are tangible forms of discriminatory practices (Salter & Blodgett, 2012; Chess & Shaw, 2015). These types of actions not only create an uncomfortable environment but also reinforce hegemonic masculinity in digital spaces. This phenomenon is often considered normal or "part of gaming culture," yet its impact can be deeply detrimental psychologically and socially for female players.

According to Fikrih & Herna (2025), the majority of female gamers in Indonesia have experienced toxic communication that culminates in sexism. Many feel the need to hide their gender identity to avoid harassment or judgment. Furthermore, in-game systems are often insufficiently responsive to address such violations effectively. It reflects the weakness of social regulation in the digital space and demonstrates the urgency of building a fairer and more inclusive gaming ecosystem.

Female Gamers' Resistance and Adaptation Strategies. In the face of masculine dominance and discriminatory treatment, female gamers demonstrate various forms of resistance and adaptation. Some choose confrontational approaches by directly responding to derogatory comments, advocating for their rights within the community, or reporting harassing players. These forms of resistance demonstrate gender awareness and the courage to challenge restrictive dominant norms. While risking conflict, these strategies reflect women's agency in shaping a more equitable digital space.

However, not all women choose to fight directly. Many also employ defensive approaches, such as disguising their identities with neutral nicknames, avoiding voice chat, or choosing to play privately. These strategies reflect a need for psychological protection amidst the social pressures they face. While seemingly passive, these actions are also a rational form of adaptation within the context of structural domination. Female gamers are thus not merely victims but also active subjects navigating virtual social realities through complex and contextual strategies (McDaniel, 2021; Martens, 2020).

A Sociological Perspective on Gender Identity in Virtual Space. Gender identity in virtual space cannot be viewed as fixed and biological, but rather as a social construct that is constantly negotiated (Butler, 1990; Turkle, 1995; Herring, 2008). In online games like MLBB, players can choose avatars, names, and interaction styles that influence how others read their identities. The concept of gender performativity, proposed by Butler (1990), states that gender is not something we have, but rather something we repeatedly perform. Therefore, in the gaming world, gender is displayed through choices of actions and interactions, which are then perceived by the community as expressions of specific identities (Ruberg, 2019; Juul, 2010; Shaw, 2014).

Digital spaces provide relative freedom to explore or even conceal gender identity, but they also produce subtle forms of social control (Nakamura, 2012; Mulvey, 1975; Corneliussen & Rettberg, 2008). Although not physically visible, women still experience gender bias because their interactions are often viewed through a stereotypical lens. It confirms that power relations in society are also reflected in cyberspace, albeit in different forms. From a digital sociology perspective, the experiences of female gamers are part of a social dynamic that demonstrates how patriarchal



structures operate and how social agents resist, negotiate, or adapt to these structures in virtual spaces (Williams et al., 2009; Kowert & Oldmeadow, 2015).

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological method, aiming to deeply understand women's subjective experiences in the game *Mobile Legends: Bang Bang* (MLBB). This approach was chosen because it can explore the hidden meanings behind women's behaviors, choices, and responses to the social situations they experience in the virtual game space. The researcher sought to capture the participants' perspectives based on their direct experiences, including how they interpret gender identity, face discrimination, and develop adaptation strategies amidst the dominance of masculinity in the gaming community.

The informants in this study were purposively selected based on certain criteria: 8 women who had actively played MLBB in Bengkulu Province for at least one year, had experienced in-game social interactions (via voice chat, team comments, or community forums), and were willing to share personal experiences related to gender issues. The total number of informants was 6, coming from various social backgrounds and ages, with the aim of obtaining a rich variety of experiences. Data were collected through in-depth online interviews using video calls and voice messages, accompanied by observations of game accounts and direct in-game interactions (if permitted by the participants).

The data analysis process was conducted using thematic analysis with reference to the procedures of Braun and Clarke (2006), which include the following stages: (1) data transcription and rereading, (2) initial coding, (3) theme search, (4) theme review, (5) theme naming and definition, and (6) preparation of the results report. Data validity was maintained through source and method triangulation techniques, as well as by conducting member checking with informants to ensure that the researcher's interpretations were in accordance with the meaning intended by the participants. The researcher also conducted self-reflexivity to minimize bias during the data collection and analysis process, considering the researcher's position as part of the gamer community.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Active and Strategic Player Roles. Most informants reported that they are not merely passive participants in games, but actively involved in developing strategies, managing game rotations, and playing a crucial role in team communication. They do not hesitate to take on positions as junglers, cores, or even shot-callers in matches. Although these roles are often considered "male-only" by the gaming community, informants still choose them because they feel capable and possess substantial experience. They stated that successfully fulfilling these roles gives them a sense of confidence and satisfaction, especially when they successfully lead their team to victory. Some have even been trusted to lead small squads or local tournament communities, demonstrating their leadership abilities, recognized by their teammates. However, they also acknowledged that earning this trust is not easy, as they have to go through a more rigorous process of proving themselves than male players. It demonstrates that even though women are capable of playing strategic roles, they still have to fight twice as hard to achieve equal recognition.

Role as Recipients of Gender Pressure. Almost all informants revealed that their presence as women in games was often immediately accompanied by negative assumptions or stereotypes. They were often perceived as incompetent players, even before the game began. Comments such as "girls must be nerds" or "just play support" appeared both explicitly in chat and in the form of social



exclusion, such as not being invited to discuss strategy. Informants stated that this kind of pressure felt heavy because it occurred repeatedly and systematically, as if it were part of the culture within the gaming community. They also felt that even small mistakes while playing were subjected to greater social punishment than those made by male players. Their role as women in games seemed to impose certain expectations that were limiting, not supportive. Some even expressed hesitation about continuing to play, as this pressure was not a one-time occurrence but a part of their daily experience. This role as recipients of gender pressure placed women in a socially and emotionally vulnerable position.

Role as Agents of Resistance and Adaptation. Despite facing significant social challenges, informants demonstrated the capacity to resist and adapt to these situations. Two informants shared that they actively report players who engage in verbal harassment or sexist comments, even engaging in confrontations through in-game communication features. They felt such actions were necessary to prevent the digital space from being dominated by unhealthy behavior. Meanwhile, others preferred adaptive strategies by concealing their gender identity, changing their nicknames to sound neutral, or only playing with safe and supportive social circles. Some choose to avoid voice chat or be inactive in community forums to avoid the risk of discrimination. Interestingly, these strategies do not necessarily indicate weakness, but rather reflect the ability to survive and navigate biased digital social systems. They interpreted these actions as ways to continue enjoying the game, even if the system is not entirely fair.

Role as a Social Bridge and Representative Symbol. Amidst the pressures they face, some informants also feel that their presence as women in the gaming community has a positive impact, both on themselves and others. Some informants feel they serve as motivation or role models for other female players who were previously hesitant to play or appear in public gaming spaces. They reported frequently receiving messages of support from other players, inspired by seeing women being competitive and confident. One informant even actively formed a female gaming community in her area, creating a safer and more inclusive space. In this role, women are not only players but also symbols that all genders can equally occupy the digital space. Their consistent presence in gaming spaces creates a new perception within the community that women can be competent, courageous, and contribute significantly to team dynamics. They serve as social bridges connecting players from diverse backgrounds and symbolic agents of change amidst the dominance of masculinity in gaming culture.

The results of this study confirm that women's involvement in the Mobile Legends: Bang Bang game is a social process full of negotiations of meaning and identity, as explained by Berger & Luckmann's Social Construction Theory. In this theory, reality is understood as the result of continuous social interactions, where individuals form and construct meaning through everyday experiences and communication. Female gamers are not merely passive objects in virtual spaces, but actively shape their identities and roles through participation, strategies, and interactions within the gaming community. Their roles as active and strategic players reflect how new realities are formed when women reject norms that discredit their abilities, a form of symbolic reconstruction of gender roles in gaming.

It aligns with Butler's (1990) notion of gender performativity, stating that gender identity is not fixed, but rather is performed and produced through repeated actions. Meanwhile, their experiences as recipients of gender pressure demonstrate that the gaming world remains an arena where dominant masculine norms are standardized through symbolic violence, as also found by Fikrih & Herna (2025), who found that the majority of female gamers experienced sexist comments or exclusion in online interactions. However, their role as agents of resistance and adaptation

demonstrates a dialectical process between structure and agency, where women not only accept such treatment but also take action to adjust to or resist existing inequalities. Some informants chose to hide their identities to survive, while others chose to report or challenge perpetrators directly. Their role as social bridges and representative symbols also proves that women not only construct meaning for themselves but also contribute to the formation of new, more equal social structures within the gaming community.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that women have diverse and complex roles in the game Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB), ranging from active and strategic players, recipients of gender pressure, agents of resistance and adaptation, to representative symbols in the gaming community. Their involvement not only reflects technical participation but also reflects the process of identity negotiation and resistance to dominant gender norms. These results indicate that women are not merely passive objects in digital spaces, but also active agents who shape their social meanings and gender identities through diverse actions and strategies. Despite facing social barriers in the form of stereotypes and symbolic violence, women gamers are able to navigate the social structures within the gaming community through various forms of adaptation and resistance. Thus, the online gaming space is an important arena for understanding contemporary gender dynamics and needs to continue to be critically studied within a digital sociology framework.

The recommendations in this study are that collaborative efforts are needed between game developers, the gaming community, and policymakers to create a fairer and more inclusive gaming environment for all genders. Game developers should strengthen the symbolic violence reporting system and build support features that ensure the comfort of female players. The gaming community also needs to develop a supportive and anti-discriminatory digital culture through education and active moderation. Further research is expected to explore the role of social media and community forums in shaping gender discourse among gamers, as well as highlight the experiences of other marginalized groups, such as non-binary and LGBTQ+ people, in online gaming spaces. In education, the results of this study can be used as teaching materials to build critical awareness about gender equality in digital literacy.

REFERENCES

- Breuer, J., & Bente, G. (2010). Why so serious? On the effects of immersive violent video games on aggressive behavior. *Journal of Media Psychology*, 22(4), 163-174. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-1105/a000022>
- Butler, J., & Trouble, G. (1990). Feminism and the subversion of identity. *Gender Trouble*, 3(1), 3-17.
- Chess, S., & Shaw, A. (2015). A conspiracy of fishes, or, how we learned to stop worrying about #GamerGate and embrace hegemonic masculinity. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 59(1), 208-220. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2014.999917>
- Consalvo, M. (2012). Confronting toxic gamer culture: A challenge for feminist game studies. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 21(2), 125-139. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2012.667821>
- Corneliussen, H. G., & Rettberg, J. W. (Eds.). (2008). *Digital culture, play, and identity: A World of Warcraft reader*. MIT Press.
- Dewey, C. (2014). The only guide to Gamergate you will ever need. The Washington Post. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com>



- Fikrih, M. N., & Herna, H. (2025). The Co-Cultural Communication Approach of Female Players in Facing Toxic Communication Behavior in Mobile Legends Bang Bang. *Eduvest-Journal of Universal Studies*, 5(1), 1168–1185.
- Fox, J., & Tang, W. Y. (2014). Sexism in online video games: The role of conformity to masculine norms and social dominance orientation. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 33, 314–320. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2013.07.014>
- Gray, K. L. (2014). *Race, gender, and deviance in Xbox Live: Theoretical perspectives from the virtual margins*. Routledge.
- Herring, S. C. (2008). Gender and power in online communication. In J. Holmes & M. Meyerhoff (Eds.), *The handbook of language and gender* (pp. 202–228). Blackwell.
- Juul, J. (2010). *A casual revolution: Reinventing video games and their players*. MIT Press.
- Kafai, Y. B., Richard, G. T., & Tynes, B. M. (2016). *Diversifying Barbie and Mortal Kombat: Intersectional perspectives and inclusive designs in gaming*. MIT Press.
- Kowert, R., & Oldmeadow, J. A. (2015). Social reputation and social bridging in online gaming. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 45, 203–210. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.12.035>
- MacCallum-Stewart, E. (2008). Real boys carry girly epics: Normalizing gender bending in online games. *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture*, 2(1), 27–40.
- Martens, B. (2020). Online gaming and identity: A sociological exploration. *Journal of Digital Sociology*, 5(1), 22–39.
- McDaniel, B. T. (2021). Masking identity in online games: Strategies of resistance among female players. *Journal of Youth and Media Studies*, 3(2), 91–105.
- Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen*, 16(3), 6–18. <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6>
- Nakamura, L. (2012). *Digitizing race: Visual cultures of the Internet*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Ndun, R. Y. (2024). *Menjumpai Ruang Sakral Dalam Game Online Melalui Realitas Virtual Pada Permainan Pubg Mobile (Doctoral Dissertation, Universitas Kristen Duta Wacana)*.
- Pratama, V. W. W., & Sodik, M. A. (2022). *Intoleransi Terhadap Diskriminasi Pada Pemain Game Online Perempuan*. Institut Ilmu Kesehatan STRADA Indonesia.
- Ruberg, B. (2019). *Video games have always been queer*. NYU Press.
- Salter, A., & Blodgett, B. M. (2012). Hypermasculinity & Dickwolves: The contentious role of women in the new gaming public. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 56(3), 401–416. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2012.705199>
- Shaw, A. (2012). Do you identify as a gamer? Gender, race, sexuality, and gamer identity. *New Media & Society*, 14(1), 28–44. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444811410394>
- Shaw, A. (2014). *Gaming at the edge: Sexuality and gender at the margins of gamer culture*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Taylor, T. L. (2006). *Play between worlds: Exploring online game culture*. MIT Press.
- Turkle, S. (1995). *Life on the screen: Identity in the age of the Internet*. Simon & Schuster.
- Whildania, Putri. *Pengaruh Game Online Terhadap Perilaku Penggunaan Bahasa Kasar Di Sman 2 Tolitoli*. Diss. Universitas Islam Negeri Datokarama Palu, 2025.
- Williams, D., Martins, N., Consalvo, M., & Ivory, J. D. (2009). The virtual census: Representations of gender, race and age in video games. *New Media & Society*, 11(5), 815–834. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444809105354>

- Witkowski, E. (2012). On the digital playing field: How we “do sport” with networked computer games. *Games and Culture*, 7(5), 349–374. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412012454222>
- Yee, N. (2006). Motivations for play in online games. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 9(6), 772–775. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cpb.2006.9.772>