

Masculinity influences on Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) among students from selected State Universities in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the impact of masculinity on student participation and experiences in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) among selected students at state universities in Zimbabwe, with a specific focus on League of Legends. Through a mixed-methods study of 750 students across three universities, the research demonstrates that hegemonic masculinity plays an influential role in male students' gaming preferences, player character choices, and social behaviours. The results suggest that online gaming spaces in Zimbabwe are characterised by hyper-masculinity and are hyper-male environments, which see masculine stereotypes and behaviours both reinforced by the structure of game design and social interactions within them. Typical social norms and hegemonic masculine profiles are reproduced in gameplay, where female players are more likely to choose a role of a gender neutral or fluid character who becomes subjected to marginalisation. Connell's use of theory, constructed as hegemonic masculinity, reveals the extent to which gaming practices are structured by culture and how gender norms in media perpetuate inequities across digital spaces. The findings underscore the need for initiatives to counter hegemonic masculinity and the creation of gendered meanings in gaming by designing game interventions that promote inclusiveness and diversity, thereby fostering more equitable gaming communities. These contributions can further our understanding of virtual gender dynamics in Africa and shed light on potential measures to promote the development of inclusive e-gaming environments.

Keywords: masculinity; massively multiplayer online role-playing games; state university students; Zimbabwe

Introduction

This study examines the role of masculinities in massively multiplayer online role-playing games amongst selected Zimbabwean university students. The research critically explores and problematizes the subtle and complex relationship between game playing and participation, as well as the relationship between game playing, participation, and hegemonic masculinity in Zimbabwe. The *League of Legends* game was purposively sampled as a case study, focusing on how randomly selected students from the University of Zimbabwe, Midlands State University, and Chinhoyi University of Technology participate in and relate to online role-playing games (Baah Acheamfour, 2024; Stratton, 2024). Masculinities refers to patterns of social practice associated with the position of men in any society's set of gender relations (Connell & Wood, 2005; SaThierbach et al., 2015; Sipungu, 2023). As Blackburn and Scharrer (2019) indicate, masculinity manifests in different forms as it intersects with race,

class, sexual orientation, and other aspects of identity. On the other hand, Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) refer to web-based games that allow gamers from different locations to choose from various roles to play.

This study argues that gaming, as a medium, is among the most important contemporary cultural carriers that may reinforce salient hegemonic masculinity in participation and structure among selected Zimbabwean university students. Giaccardi et al. (2017) assert that the conventional media have been accused of (re)producing toxic masculinity and exerting pressure on men. Likewise, Tian et al. (2023) and Wilska et al. (2023) have indicated that sports and pop culture are more accessible to young people through social media. The study submits that these online platforms are characterised by hegemonic masculinity traits predominantly where 'real men' are recognised. This notion is supported by Siregar (2022), who argues that online new media justifies the notion that males are dominant over women in all aspects of life. However, the place of masculinities in MMORPGs among Zimbabwean university students remains understudied in the academic arena. Some studies (Chen, 2023; Cross et al., 2024) suggest that video games can perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes that promote male dominance by featuring hyper-masculine male characters and objectifying female ones. However, in contrast, Amory and Molomo (2012), whose study investigated preferences and attitudes of young South Africans who play computer video games, found that young South African males and females like similar games and identify with game characters, and similarly rate their competitiveness.

Literature review

Game synopsis

League of Legends is a multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) game developed by Riot Games. Two squads, each consisting of five players, who play on a virtually integrated battlefield called the Summoner's Rift, play the game. The game aims to destroy the enemy team's Nexus, located in their base. Players form a team and choose a champion to play, each champion has unique abilities and characteristics. Players contest and fight against their enemy team for control of the map. They gain gold and experience to level up and become more powerful. *League of Legends* boasts a large and active community, comprising millions of players worldwide. The game also has a competitive e-sports scene, with professional players and teams competing in major tournaments and leagues, such as the *League of Legends* World Championship (Griffiths et al., 2011).

Trends, Gaming Cultures in Africa

This section examines the existing literature on gaming trends in Africa. The section submits that African gaming culture is diverse and evolving rapidly, with mobile gaming, e-sports, and game development emerging as key trends. Bitanihirwe et al.

(2022) argue that the gaming industry in Africa has experienced significant growth in recent years, driven by increased internet access and technological advancements. Likewise, in Zimbabwe, this growth is attributed to the increasing number of young people who are playing mobile games.

As the continent continues to gain access to affordable technology and infrastructure, it is expected that the gaming culture in Africa will continue to grow and evolve in exciting new ways. There is, however, a scarcity of studies exploring the intersections of online gaming and gender issues, particularly in Zimbabwe. The gaming culture in Africa is a complex and rapidly evolving landscape that reflects the continent's diverse cultures and demographics. While gaming has historically been seen as a niche hobby for a select group of enthusiasts, Block and Haack (2021) argue that gaming is rapidly gaining popularity across the continent as more people gain access to affordable internet and mobile devices. Likewise, Zimbabwe is not exempt from the rapid growth of gaming in the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). One of the key drivers of gaming in Africa is the rise of mobile gaming, which is particularly prevalent in areas where console and computer gaming are less accessible due to higher costs and lower availability (Block & Haack, 2021).

E-sports events and competitions are becoming more common across the continent, with African countries such as Egypt, Kenya and South Africa hosting international gaming tournaments. However, in dire socio-economic economies like Zimbabwe, e-sports are considered a luxury (Mann et al., 2018). It is against this background that the present study aims to expand on such studies to investigate the influences on gaming cultures among Zimbabwean university students. E-sports have led to the rise of professional African gamers and teams who earn money and recognition from their gaming skills. Pitroso (2023) submits that the gaming culture in Africa is also reflective of the continent's exceptional cultural heritage, with many games incorporating traditional African themes and motifs. For example, the award-winning mobile game, *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons*, a game that combines puzzle-solving mechanics with strong storytelling, was developed by Blink Works, a South African gaming studio. The game draws on Afrocentric folklore and features an Indigenous soundtrack. Gaming culture in Africa is marked by a burgeoning interest in game development.

Theoretical framework

This paper is situated within the framework of hegemonic masculinity. The theory is an analytical tool to identify attitudes and practices among men that perpetuate gender inequalities (Connell & Wood, 2005). The theory is largely influenced by Gramsci's (1971) notion of hegemony as a philosophical underpinning that legitimises, sustains, and reinforces the interests of domination in society within particular historical periods (Balakrishnan, 2015; Chantal Mouffe, 1979). Hegemonic masculinity, in Connell's terms, constitutes the most powerful and most socially prized form of masculinity available to men. The present study argues that masculinity is evident in online

gaming, where young university women subconsciously reinforce the notion of domination on their preferred gaming characters. Since time immemorial, games have been physical activities that have been played by both adults and children. Scholars Burnett and Hollander (2004), Moloi et al. (2021), and Nyota and Mapara (2008) argue that, in Africa, games have been instrumental in reinforcing unity, providing entertainment, promoting physical training, and facilitating education, as well as serving recreational purposes.

Several games have been played by Africans; the Shona people of Zimbabwe play *tsoro*, *nhodo*, etc. (Tatira, 2014). According to Tatira (2014) games like *nhodo* (A game where children fork out small objects from a small hole and returning an object at a time), *matakanana* (playhouse) and *pada* are more feminine in nature and have been popular amongst girls, whereas *tsoro* (a game in the family of draft) and *pakasungwa neutare* (It is strongly bound by unbreakable metallic bonds) (A game in which children attempt to break a human shield) are mainly identified as muscular games which are mostly played by males. The present study arose from a realisation that the identification of masculinity in modern online gaming has been largely overlooked in academia. Masculinity in gaming has been a topic of discussion for a long time.

There is a limited amount of research on the influence of masculinity in gaming in Zimbabwe. In Zimbabwean cultures, traditional gender roles assert that men should be dominant, assertive, and competitive while women are expected to be submissive, cooperative, and nurturing (Riley, 2011). This study examined how expectations are reflected in the choices made when selecting and playing the *League of Legends* online game by Zimbabwean university students. While there is limited research on the influence of masculinity in gaming in Zimbabwe, the present study assumed that traditional gender roles and expectations impact how gaming is played and perceived by selected young university men and women.

Methodology

The study adopted a mixed-methods research design combining qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis methods to investigate the role of masculinity on participation in MMORPGs by university students in Zimbabwe. A mixed-methods design was chosen because quantitative analysis data provided statistical projections on gaming behaviour and demographic antecedents, whilst qualitative analysis (Putri et al., 2021), gave depth to insight into perception, experience and social cues about masculinity versus gaming culture. The study population consisted of undergraduate students from three purposively selected state universities in Zimbabwe: the University of Zimbabwe, Midlands State University, and Chinhoyi University of Technology. A stratified random sampling technique was used to include heterogeneity of the student body for their representativeness (Ghanad, 2023). University and academic discipline also stratified the population. The sample was diverse and included students from disciplines that differed in terms of gaming behaviours and attitudes towards

masculinity (e.g., students enrolled in biological sciences, humanities, health sciences, and engineering).

In terms of the sample size, a total of 750 students were aimed for, with 250 from each of the three selected universities for sampling. This number was calculated using Cochran's (1977) formula for estimating sample size at a 95% level of confidence and a margin of error of plus or minus 5% to represent the proportion of students in each university, based on figures provided by Qing and Valliant (2025). The target was to recruit 83 students per faculty at each university, with a proportional allocation across faculties, to enable meaningful subgroup analyses.

The data was collected through the structured online questionnaire on Google Forms. Items in the questionnaire were closed-ended and included questions related to demographics (age, gender, field of study, year of study), gaming habits (number of hours spent playing MMORPGs per week; main champions played; styles adopted), and perceptions about masculinity and male-female game behaviour.

The quantitative data were complemented with qualitative data from semi-structured interviews and open-ended survey questions (Muzari et al., 2022). In-depth interviews with 30 students (10 from each university) selected purposively to reflect diversity in gender, field of study, and amount of computer gaming experience were conducted. The interviews encouraged personal reflections (e.g., experience, masculinity in gaming) and social interactions within online groups in gaming.

The qualitative data were subjected to thematic coding, a common method used to detect, analyse and report systematically the patterns found in the textual data (Lochmiller, 2021). All transcripts and open-ended response texts were transcribed verbatim; initial coding followed to classify data into preliminary themes under names which included masculinity, gender stereotypes, digital contacts, and cultural norms. These codes were subsequently revised from a trial-and-error approach, resulting in the narrowing down of similar codes to broader themes. Data was analyzed in SPSS. Before data analysis, the data were tested for normality using the Shapiro-Wilk test and were found to conform to the normality assumptions. The Kruskal-Wallis test was performed to investigate the associations between various demographic parameters and gaming behaviours of students. In addition, we performed a one-way ANOVA at a five (5) per cent significance level to test for the variation in gaming cultures across the three selected universities. Data confidentiality was protected by de-identifying participants' responses and securely storing digital files, which were accessed only by the research team (Lochmiller, 2021). This methodological process enabled a thorough investigation of how masculinity influences MMORPG participation among Zimbabwean university students, ultimately combining strong quantitative analysis with nuanced qualitative findings.

Results

Respondents' distribution by gender

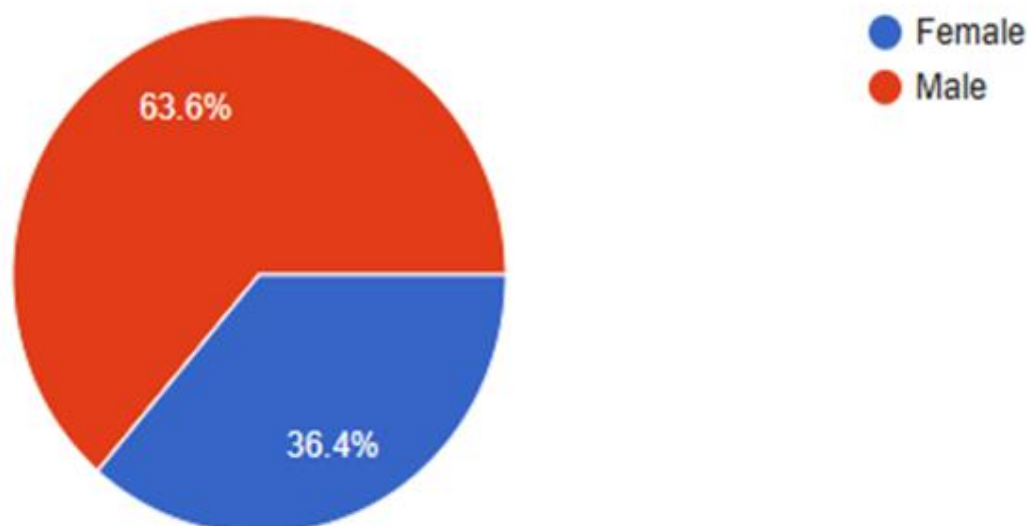


Figure 1: Distribution of respondents by gender.

The study found that male students in Zimbabwe exhibited a higher interest and engagement in the *League of Legends* game than their female peers. This is evidenced by the fact that the proportion of male respondents in the study was significantly higher, at 63.6 per cent, compared to 36.4 per cent of female students, as shown in Figure 1. The gender disparity in online gaming participation may be attributed to several factors, such as gender socialisation, cultural norms, and societal expectations. For example, males may be encouraged to engage in more technology-related activities, while females are steered towards activities deemed more feminine (Blackburn & Scharrer, 2019; Chen, 2023; Fu, 2025). The study noted that online gaming, particularly *League of Legends*, is perceived as a male-dominated activity, thereby discouraging female participation. It was established that there is a strong relationship between masculinity and the choice to play the *League of Legends* online game among male students. The more masculine a student was, the more likely they were to play this game. This was attributed to the fact that the *League of Legends* offers a platform where male players can engage in activities that enhance their masculinity, such as fighting, hunting, and exploring dangerous territories. The study underscores how participants' gender identity is reflected in the game and how they use the *League of Legends* game to engage in displays of masculinity. The research shows that the majority of male players adopt masculine avatars, which allows them to perform hyper-masculine behaviours and activities that might not be acceptable in their real-life settings.

The study also reveals the impact of gendered interaction on the *League of Legends* games, where female players tend to avoid gender stereotypes and instead opt for neutral or gender-fluid champions, such as Varus, Zoe, Xayah, Neeko, Taliyah, and Rakan. Neeko, for instance, is a chameleon-like creature that can change its appearance to look like anyone in the game. Zoe is a naughty childlike champion who does not conform to traditional gender roles, and male respondents showed reservations in associating with such characters. Female players in the *League of Legends* tend to distance themselves from traditional gender stereotypes when they choose champions who are neutral or gender fluid, which has all been proven by their playing behaviour, as the study revealed. This phenomenon can be understood using the hegemonic masculinity theory, which explains how cultural practices and societal norms contribute to dominant versions of masculinity that are built based upon the marginalisation or devaluation of femininity as well as non-normative gender identities (Connell 1987, 1995). Within the realm of online gaming, hegemonic masculinity has been linked to the prevalence and valorisation of dominant, aggressive and hyper-masculine behaviour that reiterates itself in game design and character as well as player interactions (Mahalik et al., 2003).

While it is more subtle, in what could almost be considered a form of hegemonic femininity, female players express their games through playing champions like Neeko, who can shapeshift and embody multiple identities themselves in opposition to the rigid gender binary that colours gaming spaces. By slotting into these roles, they challenge the gendered associations with traditional support roles and become powerful figures that many female players may find empowering or even just fun to play, as opposed to the alternative of fulfilling a role as an emblematic guest character of the game that is suitably monogendered for its chosen demographic.

Notably, male participants were more hesitant to endorse these characters and behaviours as fathers in their responses, again shedding light on the role of hegemonic masculinity in shaping ideas about proper perceptions of gender related conduct and selection choices. Such hesitations could result from cultural norms that depict men as strong, in control, and stoic, attributes that are often encouraged in the game through its hyper-masculine champions and aggressive play type (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Men's reluctance to accept characters that deviate from traditional portrayals of (masculine) power and control likely reflects some level of internalised hegemonic norms relating masculinity with these benefits, which collectively inhibit their acceptance of characters who proudly live gender fluid or non-conforming gender expressions (Mahalik et al., 2003).

Respondents' distribution by age

Figure 2 below shows the study on masculinity influences on the *League of Legends* game among students from selected state universities in Zimbabwe had a majority of study participants in the age category 21-23 years (36.4 percent), followed by those in

the age categories (18-20 & 24-26 years) (27.3 percent), while a small proportion was above 30 years (9 percent). This age distribution can be attributed to the fact that the study participants were all university students, and thus, most of them fell within the 18-26 years age bracket. Furthermore, this age group is known to be highly interested in online games such as the *League of Legends*, which could explain why they were more likely to participate in the study. This finding is consistent with previous studies that have shown that young adults are more likely to be actively engaged in playing video games (Alwhaibi et al., 2024).

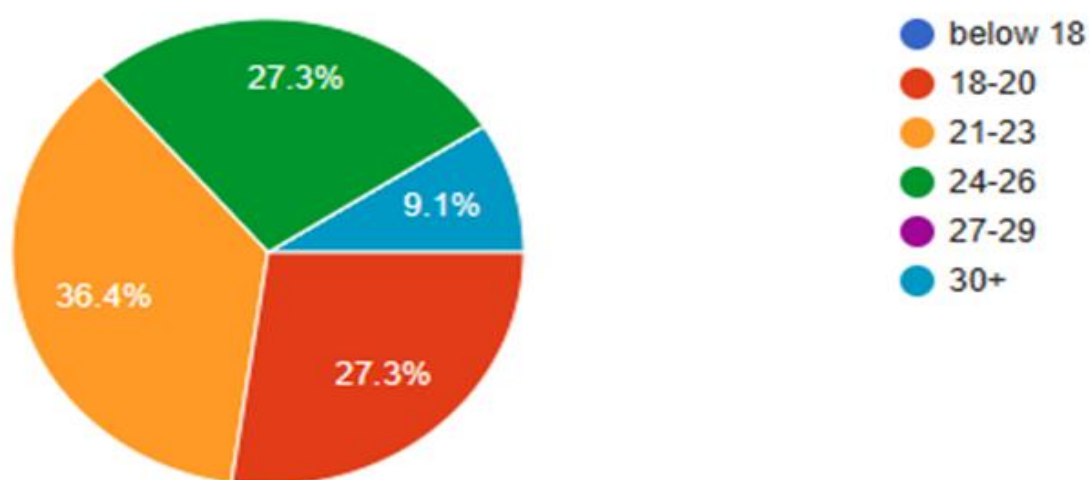


Figure 2: Respondents' distribution by age.

Respondents' distribution by university

Results showed that the majority of the study participants were enrolled with the Midlands State University (36 per cent), followed by the University of Zimbabwe (33 per cent), and lastly Chinhoyi University of Technology (31 per cent). The disparity in participation from different university students was, however, insignificant.

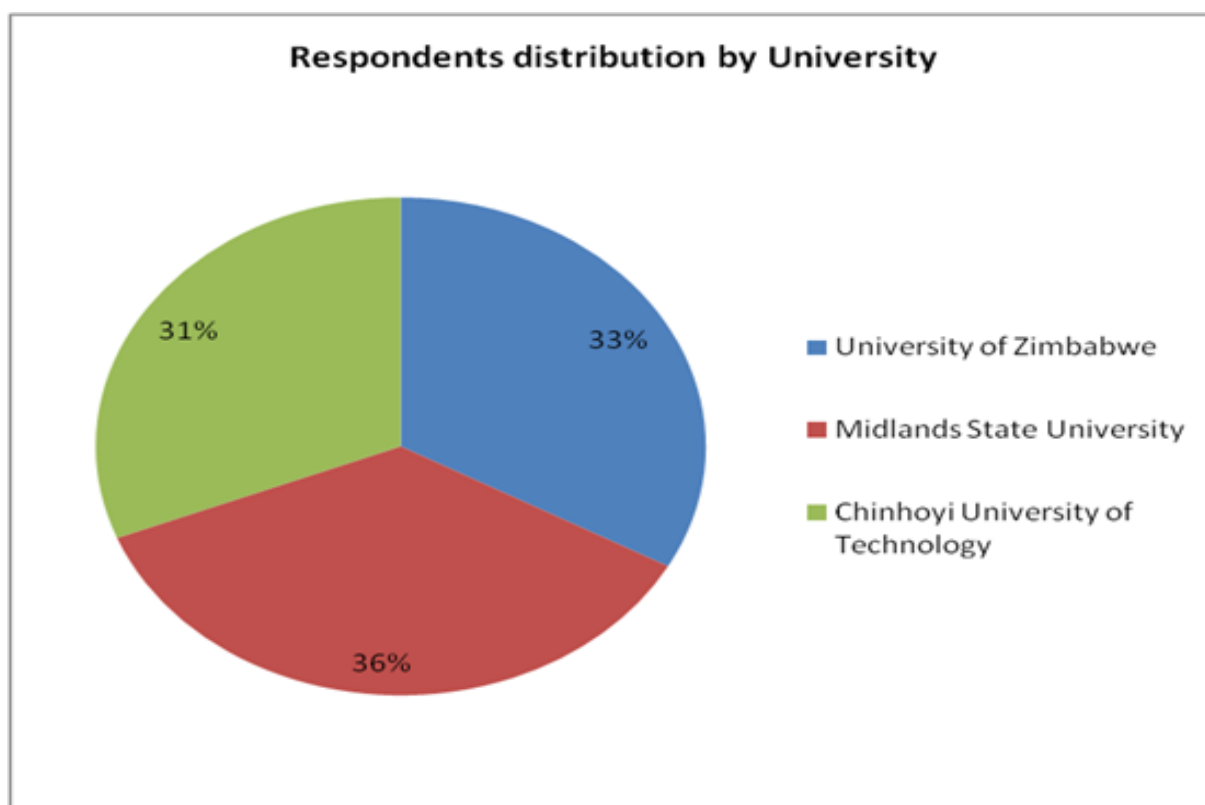


Figure 3: Respondents' distribution by university

Field of study

The data analysis conducted shows that there is a significant association between the field of study and player activity in online game play among students. The *chi*-square test result ($\chi^2 = 8.4$) indicates that there is a significant difference in the proportion of students across different fields of study who engage in online game play. The degree of freedom ($d.f = 5$) suggests that there were six categories of field of study being compared. The *p*-value ($p < 0.001$) indicates that the results obtained from the analysis are statistically significant and not due to chance. The majority of the study participants were in the biological sciences field (26 per cent), followed by those in the humanities (22 per cent). Students studying in the health sciences field had the least representation among the study participants (8 per cent), as illustrated in Figure 4 below.

The results of this analysis suggest that there are differences in the extent of engagement in online game play among students from different fields of study. Further exploration of these differences can provide insight into the possible reasons why students from different fields of study have different levels of engagement in online game play. Our findings corroborate those of Meyer et al. (2019), who argue that individuals who major in science tend to score higher in openness to experience, which is characterized by a desire for novelty, variety, and intellectual curiosity. Online gaming, in this case, with its vast array of game genres and complex gameplay

mechanics that require strategic planning and problem-solving skills, may appeal to the curiosity and adaptability of science students (Block & Haack, 2021).

Another factor we noted that may contribute to the higher participation rate of biological sciences students in online gaming is time management. Fountaine et al. (2011) argue that college students who major in science tend to engage in more sedentary behaviours, such as doing homework, studying, and computer use. Due to the nature of biological sciences coursework, students often have to spend long hours in laboratories and library research, making it more convenient to engage in leisure activities that are available online, such as gaming (Morris et al., 2013). The study established that the field of study often influences the nature of gameplay, and the interests and preferences of individuals participating in the *League of Legends*. The high number of participants from the biological sciences field implies that the students from these faculties might be technologically active compared to their counterparts in the other disciplines. The study investigated the influence of masculinity on gameplay, which could potentially uncover valuable insight into gaming behaviour and preferences related to gender. However, the research also considered exploring the intersectionality of gender and field of study, as this gave more insight into how different demographic factors can influence gameplay.

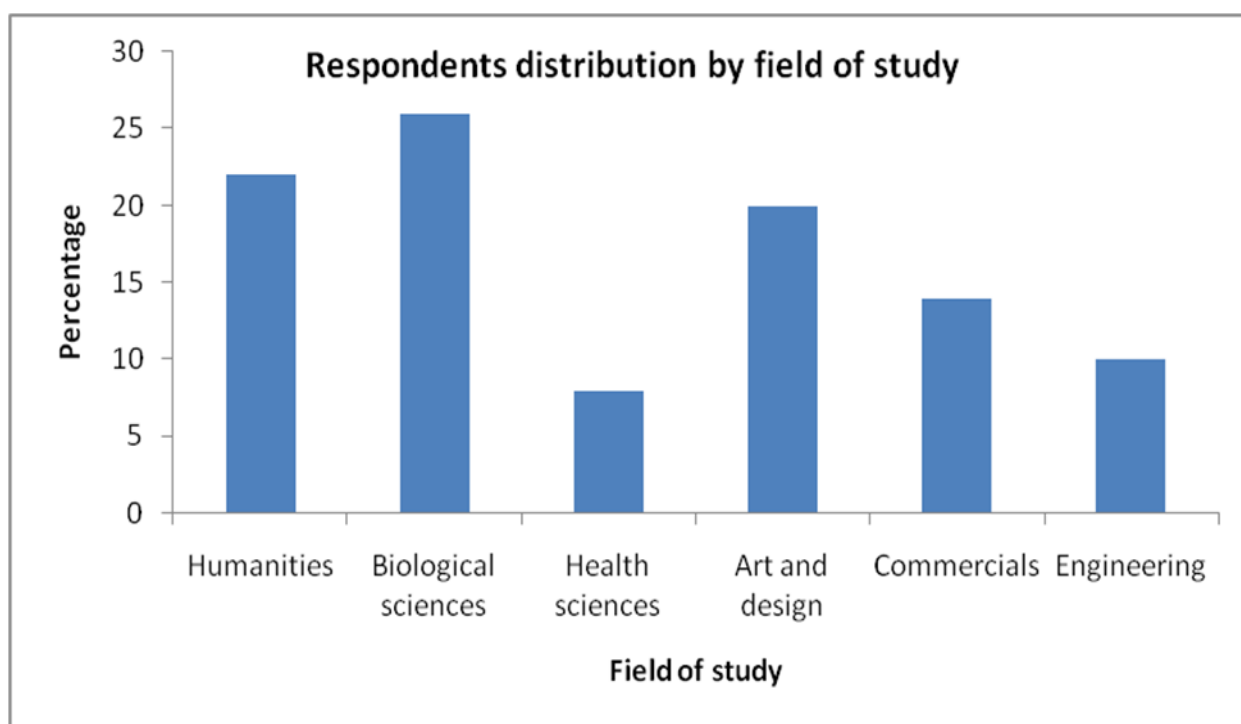


Figure 4: Respondents' distribution by field of study.

Socio-demographic influences on game cultures in universities

Results showed that gender plays an important role in influencing online gaming decisions. The majority of female students (82 per cent) interviewed during the study

indicated that they do not play the *League of Legends* online game. This is in contrast to male students, where 86 per cent agreed that they play the *League of Legends* game. In addition, there was no significant difference in students' participation in playing the *League of Legends* multiplayer games across the three state universities ($KW\chi^2 = 11.138$; $df = 2$; $p < 0.05$). We noted a significant ($\chi^2 = 8.4$, $d.f = 5$, $p < 0.001$) association between field of study and player activity in online game play among the students. We established several variables that may have an impact on how gender can influence gaming decisions in the *League of Legends*.

Firstly, the findings of this study reveal that the community of the *League of Legends* is predominantly male. Male students may have more access to online gaming due to societal norms and expectations. We argue that male students have more opportunities to play the *League of Legends* and hone their skills. We argue that hegemonic masculinity present in the *League of Legends* gaming community results in female gamers being subject to harassment, discrimination, and exclusion from the gaming community.

Based on the statistical analysis above, the results established that women may feel pressured to conform to male norms and behaviors while playing. This can lead to women avoiding certain champions or roles in the game due to stereotypes or fear of judgment.

The analysis also revealed that the representation of women in the game's artwork, design, and characters was not as diverse, which led to female students feeling less connected to and less interested in the game compared to their male counterparts. It was established that some players criticised the game for sexualizing or objectifying its female characters through their outfit designs, body proportions, and suggestive poses. For example, some female champions, such as Lux, Miss Fortune, Morgana (see Figure 5), and Kai'Sa, have their cleavage and legs exposed; the revealing clothing and exaggerated physical features emphasise their sex appeal rather than their abilities or personalities. These portrayals can reinforce the societal expectations of femininity and create dissatisfaction among female players who do not conform to these ideals. Female players may experience pressure to conform to these gender expectations to fit in with the dominant male gaming culture and avoid being excluded from the community, as Morris et al. (2013) alluded to.

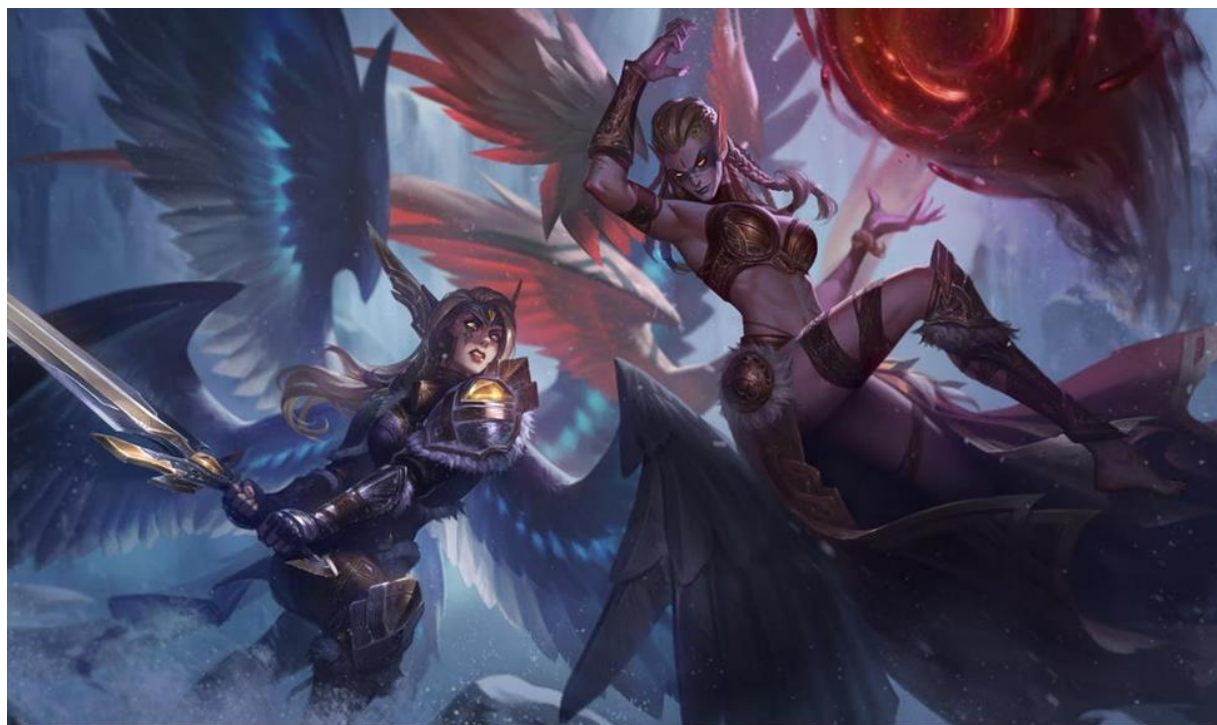


Figure 5: Morgana - *League of Legends*

Female respondents have accused the *League of Legends* of having a toxic culture. Female students indicated that they experience gender-based harassment while playing. This has led to female participants avoiding communication or playing more defensively, affecting their overall gaming decision-making.

Locating Masculinities in The *League of Legends*: An Overview

The *League of Legends* is an online multiplayer game where two teams of five formidable champions compete to overthrow an opponent's base, relying on economic resources and information. As participants engage in this ultimate warfare experience featuring up to 154 distinct types of ultra-warriors, they craft strategic manoeuvres, eliminate opponents, and destroy opposing towers from their bases. Each participant selects a character, known as a champion within gaming terminology. A total of 154 champions is available, each endowed with four abilities. Players may also purchase items from in-game shops to further enhance their champions. The game offers an abundance of exciting battles and competitive opportunities.

As discovered in this study, among the 154 champions, 94 are male, 56 are female, and four (4) can be called male or female based on their pronouns. As Leo (2021) noted, champions like Cho'Gath and Nocturne are first-person plurals without gender specific pronouns. The case of Kindred is interesting. This character is made up entirely of a canid, known as *he*, represented by a wolf, and another, *she*, represented by a sheep. This gender breakdown of champions reflects underlying social norms and stereotypes. Each champion has its main role, and many have secondary roles.

The six roles assigned to champions are assassin, fighter, mage, marksman, support, and tank. The gender issue does not end there.

In the game, male characters are predominantly portrayed as robust and resilient figures who serve a protective role. Conversely, female characters are more frequently depicted as support figures (something that is also reflected in most standing armies of today), exemplifying traits of care and nurturing. Additionally, women are increasingly represented as marksmen, aligning with traditional stereotypes of women as skilled archers or proficient spell casters. The majority of fighters are male. These patterns reinforce gender roles, which are quite strictly defined in this largely heteronormative situation where hegemonic masculinity and femininity are very much in evidence.

Hegemonic masculinity, from Connell (1995), refers to the dominant form of masculinity privileged and identified as essential within a particular social setting. Within Zimbabwe, traditional attitudes towards manhood are defined by qualities like strength, dominance, competitiveness, and cruelty, a trait that is given traction and sustained by phallocentricism (Macleod, 2007). Phallocentricism sustains hegemonic masculinity by metaphorically equating the phallus (male sexual organ) with power, rationality, and authority. It thus reinforces an inflexible gender hierarchy that privileges dominant, heteronormative masculinities while marginalizing femininities and non-conforming masculinities through cultural, institutional, and psychological mechanisms.

In online gaming, hegemonic masculinity is based on the dominance or strong preference for villainous characters, male champions for the most part associated with resistance and aggression. But the study also found that norms of dominant masculinity are built into the gaming community through social and cultural practices. Male champions embodying aggression and dominance are a favorite thing for those playing the game. Aggressive behaviors during gameplay are not discouraged and condemned, as in most traditional sedentary forms of interactive entertainment. This continues to affirm certain images of masculinity, those of power, control, and violence, while marginalising other forms that do not harmonise with these values. The overrepresentation of hyper-masculine heroes and behaviours in the *League of Legends* is understandable when considering forces that support the idea that both aggression and competitiveness are quintessential traits of masculinity in society (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), traits that in Zimbabwean politics were immortalized by the late Robert Mugabe's '*amadoda sibili*' (real men) statement (Mpofu, 2022). Thus, male players are often rewarded or acknowledged for projecting such images, and this further reinforces the hegemonic masculinity circle. Fewer women who play the *League of Legends* often are abused, are objectified, and shut out. This not only affects their game enjoyment but also represents the dominance of hegemonic masculinity in the gaming environment. Practices like these confirm that physical violence and dominance are a male prerogative; by contrast, femininity is scorned and

spat on. When women are harassed and objectified, their experience is in line with findings that hegemonic masculinity perpetuates gender imbalances while supporting a toxic culture predisposed against females (Downs & Smith, 2010).

The research also illustrates that traditional gender roles persist in Zimbabwean universities. Men are expected to be aggressive, competitive, and dominant traits reinforced by champion selections leaning towards the aggressive and strong, while women see themselves as nurturing and caring. Historically, African traditional games serve as another example of these gendered divisions. For example, the games *tsoro* and *nhodo*, are associated with male and female, respectively (Nyota & Mapara, 2008; Tatira, 2014). These cultural patterns continue to exert a strong influence on contemporary behaviour, including online gaming, where gendered expectations dictate how characters are chosen and how they interact. In this way, online performance both supports and reflects mainstream computer game culture. By the same token, games played through specific platforms like Nintendo's Wii or the PlayStation Network cannot help but mirror their parent institution's norms.

Conclusion

The study shows that in Zimbabwe's online gaming culture as portrayed by Zimbabwean university students, there is hegemonic masculinity to be found everywhere, especially in the *League of Legends*. It appears through the domination of aggressive and violent characters, the promotion of toxic behaviours becomes normal, and women are marginalised. Societal expectations of masculinity create a dominant ideal that informs how players should behave and interact, leading to the repression of those who do not conform. Viewing these dynamics in terms of hegemonic masculinity provides a valuable tool for analysing the persistent gender inequalities in Zimbabwe's game communities and orders urgent action to create more inclusive, fair gaming environments. Understanding these dynamics from the perspective of hegemonic masculinity can help unlock insights into why Zimbabwe's gaming communities maintain stubborn gender biases. It also shows which primary interventions are needed to change the gaming atmosphere. And if no one takes action, the neoliberal environment will only continue on its current course, forever increasing the exclusion of women and gamers who do not conform. This paper contributes to the literature of participation, gender, masculinities, and gender relations in African virtual gaming communities, in general, and particularly Zimbabwean online gamers. The study established that online games in Zimbabwe are male-dominated. This assertion is argued in this study as being influenced by salient, subtle production and reproduction of hegemonic masculinities in patriarchal establishments. The game itself was constructed in this study as a gendered game. Its establishments of champions have been explored, and the majority of its main characters were noted to be male. This could also point to why female players avoid participating in the game. This gender imbalance in the *League of Legends* gaming participation highlights the

need for strategies and interventions aimed at promoting gender equality and diversity in the gaming industry.

Recommendations

The findings of this study underscore the pervasive influence of hegemonic masculinity within Zimbabwean university students' online gaming communities, particularly in the context of the *League of Legends*. To foster a more inclusive and equitable gaming environment, targeted actions must be taken by key stakeholders across educational, governmental, and industry sectors. These recommendations aim to challenge entrenched gender stereotypes, promote diversity, and create safe spaces where all students can participate meaningfully in digital gaming cultures.

- University administrations and student affairs departments should develop and implement gender-inclusive policies and programs within campus gaming communities and e-sports initiatives. Establishing dedicated clubs or forums that promote safe, respectful, and inclusive gaming environments will encourage broader participation from female students and those who do not conform to traditional masculine norms. Such initiatives can serve as platforms for raising awareness about the detrimental effects of toxic masculinity and fostering healthier social interactions among gamers.
- There is a pressing need to collaborate with game developers and industry stakeholders to create or adapt game content that reflects diversity and counters stereotypes. Promoting gender-responsive game design featuring characters and narratives that challenge hegemonic masculinity can positively influence player perceptions and behaviours. Locally developed games incorporating African cultural motifs and diverse gender representations can serve as powerful tools for reshaping gaming norms. These efforts should be supported by policymakers and industry leaders to ensure the proliferation of culturally relevant and inclusive gaming content.

Targeted awareness campaigns are essential to counteract toxic and hyper-masculine cultures prevalent in many online gaming spaces.

- Partnering with student organisations, gender advocacy groups, and civil society organisations can facilitate campaigns that highlight the harmful effects of gender-based harassment, objectification, and exclusion.
- Utilising social media platforms, university events, and peer education models can effectively reach students and instil more respectful gaming behaviours.

- Supporting ongoing research and data collection on gender dynamics in African gaming spaces is also crucial. Such initiatives can deepen understanding of the cultural, social, and psychological factors that influence gaming behaviours among Zimbabwean youth. Findings from these studies can inform policy development and intervention strategies, ensuring they are grounded in local contexts and realities.
- The creation of African-designed, gender-diverse games can catalyze broader cultural change.
- Encouraging investment and support for Indigenous game development that reflects local cultures and promotes gender equality can challenge stereotypes embedded in mainstream gaming.
- Governments, cultural ministries, and private sector investors should prioritise funding and capacity-building programs to empower local developers in this endeavour.
- Likewise, encouraging the production and dissemination of African-designed games that advocate society's diversity can make the gaming landscape more representative (Kiwa et al., 2021). Such initiatives may also shake hegemonic masculinity in gaming spaces and promote a more inclusive atmosphere among players. Encouraging more equitable participation in online gaming among male and female students may ultimately lead to the development of a more inclusive and representative gaming community.

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