

**Information, Communication & Society**

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**To cite this article:** Júlia Vilasís-Pamos & Fernanda Pires (2021): How do teens define what it means to be a gamer? Mapping teens' video game practices and cultural imaginaries from a gender and sociocultural perspective, *Information, Communication & Society*, DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2021.1883705

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1883705>

Published online: 21 Feb 2021.

# How do teens define what it means to be a gamer? Mapping teens' video game practices and cultural imaginaries from a gender and sociocultural perspective

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## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 15 May 2020 Accepted 25 January 2021

## ABSTRACT

This study analyses how gender and socioeconomic characteristics permeate teens' discourses when they define what it means to be a gamer. Video games have become a reference framework for teenagers, in which gaming practices may be important parts of their identity and social context. In addition, many teens see gaming as a professional possibility. This study provides five new gamer categories based on data from four focus groups carried out in Spain with teens from 12 to 16 years old. The 'escapist-gamer' and the 'ashamed-gamer' categories are based on teens' gaming practices, and the 'celebrity-platform-gamer', the 'professional-gamer' and the 'poser-gamer' are based on the adolescents' cultural imaginaries and aspirations. These categories demonstrate that certain male game practices are explicit, while female game practices are silenced. Moreover, sociodemographic characteristics complexify inequalities further, resulting in a struggle against normative models of femininity and masculinity, and determining teens' aspirations and conceptions of the video game world. Thus, the gamer categories exemplify how video games are currently playing a pivotal role in forging unequal gender and social identities. And, at the same time, these categories show how teens struggle against heteronormative values associated with the game industry.

## KEYWORDS

Gamer; gender; gaming culture; teens; video game practices

## Introduction

Video games play an important role in teenagers' everyday lives and media practices. The video game market is growing in different parts of the world. According to the Annual Report of the Spanish Video Game Association (AEVI), the entire international market earned around 152.1 billion dollars in 2019. Europe is the third biggest market, only behind Asia and the United States. In Spain, where our study was carried out, video game consumption is constantly increasing. It has a market of 15.1 million people (58% men and 42% women). Moreover, most video game users come from the younger generation (AEVI, 2019). Therefore, it is not surprising that video games and their related practices are at the core of teens' media activities. Teens use video games and digital platforms like YouTube and Twitch TV, and a few are also part of the world of eSports. They use these platforms

to play with others, to share gameplays, and to learn tricks, among other activities (Pires et al., 2019). Moreover, these platforms have widened the possibilities of playing.

As the young population make up a large percentage of the video game users, they therefore deserve research attention. Teens can play by themselves, with others in person and online. They can also play with friends or with other people who are connected in these digital spaces (Lehnart, 2015).

The main objective of this article is to map the gamer categories that are revealed when teens put into discourse their game practices and cultural imaginaries, placing particular emphasis on the relationship with gender and socioeconomic characteristics. Both variables are fundamental for understanding teens' consumption patterns and their perceptions of video games. Cultural imaginaries are intrinsic in teens' cultural models, which can be considered a set of ideas and definitions that shape people's practices, aspirations, imaginaries and theories about how they understand the world surrounding them (Gee, 2015). That is, cultural models may differ over time because they are grounded deeply in people's cultural production and social contexts. Through them people make choices and guesses that can vary across different cultural groups and even within the same society (Gee, 2015, p. 104). Teens' practices and their vision of what it means to be a gamer reflect their cultural models, and therefore their cultural imaginaries. In this research, we approach cultural imaginaries as mental schemas, that is, they refer particularly to the symbolic images, visions, and suppositions that teens' project on what they understand and validate to be a gamer through their cultural models (Yar, 2014, p. 2).

In this study, we look at the gamer categories that emerge from the discourses of teen-agers from two Spanish schools located in Barcelona. Barcelona is a socially stratified city and has districts and neighbourhoods with different socio-demographic characteristics, which are reflected in the school centres and their funding systems (Blanco & Nel, 2018).

To fulfil the study objective, we asked two research questions: (1) What gamer categories can be found in the teens' discourses about their video game practices and cultural imaginaries? and (2) How can gamer identities be understood considering gender and socioeconomic status?

We first used a qualitative questionnaire to access and map the teens' video game practices. We then held a series of focus groups with teens from 12 to 16 years old to obtain an in-depth understanding of the studied phenomenon. During the analysis, we found that their social context plays a key role in the teens' imaginaries and practices. We detected gamer categories related to gendered roles that are made more complex by the adolescents' socioeconomic background. Both gender and their social context influence the teens' gaming practices and their conceptions of gamers, as well as their aspirations to obtain success and the pursuit of new 'jobs' linked to YouTube and eSports.

## **The sociocultural categorization process of the gamer identity**

The 'gamer' category is mainly associated with and studied in relation to the time spent in the video game world and self-identification of the player with certain consumption practices, such as the type of game and its aesthetics, as well as their attitudes and preferences concerning games (Kowert et al., 2014). However, there is a growing body of research on games that contributes to the consolidation of the gamer as a social and cultural category. As DeVane and Squire (2008) point out, this perspective considers video games as phenomena that are interpreted differently based on the user's cultural model. Therefore, the game practice depends on the player's social identity, and thus, is related to their context. The approach to the gamer identity is therefore subject to the construction of meanings resulting from the interactivity of the player's social practices and the social environment. DeVane and Squire (2008) analysed the interpretation of the video game *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* with groups of young socially disadvantaged people (aged 9–18 years old) and demonstrated that the cultural model of these young people underlaid the meanings given to the game. Similarly, to the present study, the participants were divided depending on their socioeconomic status and the school they attended, showing that the economic reality and social and educational trends interact with the experiences, interpretations and cultural models of the young people, generating meanings from their media practices. In a similar line, Shaw (2012) shows that the gamer identity intersects with gender, race and sexuality, evidencing the marginalization of certain groups simply because they do not fit with the prototypical consumer (young white man) generated and promoted by the video game industry. Thus, it is necessary to represent and consider these groups to understand the cultural and social implications that affect the construction of media identities.

Along the same lines, De Grove et al. (2015) used social network analysis and in-depth interviews to analyse intragroup and intergroup influences, demonstrating that the gamer identity is still subject to social and cultural stereotypes of gender and consumption. For example, the variables 'time spent' and 'type of game' continue to determine the definition of gamer identity, specifically the distinction between categories like casual and hardcore gamer, which are two game studies pillars. According to Juul (2010), a casual gamer is a category that breaks the dichotomy between gamer and non-gamer. It questions what can be considered a video game, regardless of technical specifications and social judgments surrounding it. For the author, the casual gamer definition is the counterdefinition of the hardcore player because it challenges the stereotypes that traditionally characterize the definition of the hardcore gamer, which is usually based on time spent, experience, and the commitment to difficult games. Although the categories that Juul (2010) proposes are a source of controversy, they also prompt debate concerning the importance of identity and cultural formation in gaming practices.

Similarly, Muriel and Crawford (2018) conducted a study from the sociocultural perspective through the AnaitGames platform, where they asked openly for the definition of the gamer identity. They contemplate the social appropriations of the gamer category and discuss the blurriness of the gamer identity, stating that it is a label that is always changing. Therefore, they propose five different types of gamer:

hardcore-subcultural gamer, casual gamer, gamer as a foodie-connoisseur, cultural-intellectual gamer, and the idea that everyone is a gamer (pp. 150–175). The participants in the authors' study relate the hardcore-subcultural gamer to a person considered to be a game freak who spends a huge amount of time playing video games. They associated this category with a particular stereotype of an immature, obsessive man with unhealthy daily habits. However, the participants considered the casual gamer as someone who has a preference for positive and pleasant fantasy games, has played a few games, is willing to spend a bit of time and a few resources on playing video games, and dislikes difficult games. The category of everyone is a gamer was defined as someone that regardless of the time spent and the passion for video games considers themselves to be a gamer. The cultural-intellectual category is someone who explores the medium from a critical viewpoint. Finally, the last category of Muriel and Crawford (2018) is the foodie-connoisseur, which establishes that a gamer is a person who explores the medium by playing and spending a lot of time on a wide range of games, paying attention to their artistic, cultural, technical, and economic dimensions.

All of these categories and contributions consider the gamer identity from the player's point of view, understanding the player as an active user (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2008). Thus, they look at the player's relationship with the medium in terms of their interests, personal and professional implications, and the time they spend. These contributions evidence that video games are becoming an increasingly central part of people's social and cultural practices.

### **Gender representation and video game practices**

Traditionally, the video game industry was primarily made by men, who were mainly white, young, and heterosexual (Murray, 2019). Conversely, women have been excluded and used from the sexualized representation of bodies, through clothing, roles and attitudes. Thus, based on this representation, a clearly masculine market niche has been determined, generating differences in the social practices of consumption of the medium and contributing to the construction of the group identity with a clear gender bias (Cote, 2018).

According to the historical review by Kirkpatrick (2013), in the 1990s, gaming magazines looked like boys' comics and reinforced gaming as a sexist media practice. Women were rendered more or less invisible by the structural transformation of gaming discourse and character representations within games. In the late 2000s, the industry has begun to design games that target women. Nonetheless, these games are still scarce or leave the players stuck with characters with perfect bodies rooted in sexism, racism, ageism, and classism (Shaw, 2012). These game characters reproduce patriarchal and misogynistic values, in which women are seen as invisible and inferior, thus promoting discriminatory behaviour (Kowert et al., 2017).

It is not surprising that the first feminist critiques have focused on the problematic of how women's bodies are represented in video games. Avatars are often created for the male gaze, for example, Lara Croft from Tomb Raider (Consalvo, 2012).

Cote (2018) analysed the representation of gender in the Nintendo Power magazines between 1994 and 1999. Specifically, her study determined the frequency that female versus male players appeared, the sexualization of players and characters, the types of games and representations featured on the magazine covers, and the gender of magazine authors and the fans who contributed to the magazine. Cote (2018) concluded that 'games make up a vital component of popular culture, and their historical masculinization has social impacts beyond simply the audience' (p. 495). As mentioned before, 'the ways in which a group is represented both draws on and contributes to that group's identity' (Cote, 2018, p. 480), exerting a clear influence on the frequency of playing and game preferences between genres, that is, on the social and cultural practices derived from the videogame world. This, consequently, influences the construction of the gamer identity.

### **Social practices and identity**

We are living in a time in which many instances of our social life are enacted through media-related practices (Couldry, 2012) using devices and technologies, such as video games and digital platforms. Therefore, it is necessary to understand how practices are related to the construction of identities. According to Schatzki (1996), Reckwitz (2002), Warde (2005), Shove (2009) and other practice theorists from the second wave of practice theory (Postill, 2010), practices have two perspectives that should be considered. The first perspective sees practices as part of a coordinated entity, while, the second sees them as part of a performance. The practice-as-entity refers to the ways a practice is organized and takes on shapes, norms, organizations, rules and aspirations that people must understand, accept, and have to be able to carry out that practice. Second, the practice-as-performance refers to the enactment of a practice itself (Pires et al., 2019). A practice to be performed needs people (practitioners) who are the actors that have a practical knowledge that enables them to deal with different practices and situations in a skillful and creative way (Alkemeyer & Bushmann, 2017). People in practice theory are considered entities who participate, perpetuate and can transform practices through action (Hui et al., 2017). Time can be considered a fundamental element of practice-as-performance because practitioners usually time, sequence, and schedule their activities (Shove et al., 2012).

As Reckwitz (2002) states, practices are sets of routinized bodily performances that are at the same time sets of mental activities. Thus, practitioners are understood as bodies and minds, since to perform a practice people need both corporal and mental patterns of knowledge.

Shove et al. (2012) state that individual practitioners usually stop performing a practice because tension arises. This is because practitioners might have different social positions within and outside a practice that might cause conflict and disagreements (Alkemeyer & Bushmann, 2017).

All social positions can be associated with identity and subjectification within practices. Identity can be understood as a social phenomenon in a permanent state of construction through a resignification process that a person undergoes through their social practices and experiences with other people (Jenkins, 2014).

Subjectivation is part of this process of identity construction, which is inherently embedded into practices (Alkemeyer & Bushmann, 2017). That is, people can transform and form themselves when they engage with other people, use a technology, or learn how to comply with or dispute the way a practice is performed. Therefore, participating in social practices has consequences and may generate social differences, since practitioners hardly ever occupy the same socio-material positions. Moreover, the enactment of social practices may create power inequalities, as practitioners can be subjected to the functional requirements as well as the normative demands of a practice and the context in which a practice is carried out (Alkemeyer & Bushmann, 2017).

## Methods

We implemented the focus group methodology in the research to answer the following questions: (1) Which gamer categories can be found in the teens' discourses about their video game practices and cultural imaginaries? and (2) In which ways can gamer identities be understood considering gender and socioeconomic status? We paid particular attention to the ways gender and the sociodemographic characteristics of the school (semi-private vs. public funding) determine the teenage participants' definitions of gamer categories.

First, a document for obtaining the parents' informed consent was co-designed between the researchers and the respective schools to be later distributed by the schools to the parents. Second, a qualitative questionnaire for selecting the participants was developed. Third, the focus group and the qualitative questionnaire were checked and validated by each school.

The sample of participants was selected according to the following characteristics: young people aged between 12 and 16 years who affirmed to play video games on a weekly basis. Table 1. shows the participants' mean age by school and gender.

Firstly, a qualitative questionnaire with open-ended questions was used to obtain the teens' sociodemographic data and understand in detail the motivations behind their game consumption and gaming practices before the focus group. The questionnaire included questions such as, 'What are your favourite video game(s)?'; 'Why do you play those games?'; 'Do you consider yourself a (non) gamer? Why?'. Secondly, four focus groups were conducted at two different schools in Barcelona city to further explore the teens' gaming practices and the gamer definitions found in the open questionnaire.

The schools were chosen because they are situated in different neighbourhoods with contrasting characteristics (Blanco & Nel, 2018). In the focus groups we used open questions to understand why, when, how and with whom teens play video games. We asked whether the teens identified themselves as gamers or non-gamers and the reasons for this. We also looked at their family's perception of video games.

The two focus groups (FG1 and FG2) were divided according to gender. They were carried out in one public school in the El Raval neighbourhood, characterized by a lower income level, high immigration rate, and an educational level under the city's

average. The participants' nationalities were: two girls and one boy from Morocco, one girl from Ecuador, three girls and two boys from Spain, two boys from Bangladesh, one boy with double nationality (Japanese and Brazilian), and one boy from Pakistan.

Another two groups (FG3 and FG4) also divided by gender, were conducted in a semi-private school (which has both public and private funding) situated in Sarrià, a neighbourhood that is characterized by having an income and education level higher than the Barcelona average. All the participants in the semi-private school were from Spain.

**Table 1.** Mean age of participants.

		Mean age	N	SD
Public School	Girls	12.83	6	.753
	Boys	13.33	6	1.033
	Total	13.08	12	.900
Semi-Private School	Girls	14.50	6	1.225
	Boys	14.17	6	1.329
	Total	14.25	12	1.357
Total	Girls	13.58	12	1.379
	Boys	13.75	12	1.215

Note that in the entire sample, there were no non-binary identities. The study separated the teens in terms of gender and socioeconomic status, as recommended in previous studies (Shaw, 2015; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). These studies suggested designing homogeneous groups in order to create a comfortable environment to enable the emergence of clichés, generating nonconformist trends and diversity of opinions.

In the following sections, pseudonyms are used for the participants' quotes to ensure that all data are anonymized, and all the personal information is protected. Moreover, all data were analysed using the qualitative data analysis software NVIVO 11 and the gamer categories emerged inductively.

### Analysis and discussion

To facilitate the interpretation of the main analysis outcomes, this section opens with a table summarizing the main gamer categories that emerged when the teens put their practices and imaginaries into discourse. Table 2 presents the gamer categories divided into two types. The first type corresponds to all categories that emerge as a result of teens' gaming practices. The second type refers to the categories that correspond to the adolescents' cultural imaginaries. All categories include the necessary resources and the main purposes of carrying out the gaming practices.

**Table 2.** Overview gamer categories.

Categories	Practices	Resources	Purposes
<b>GAMING PRACTICES</b>			
Escapist-Gamer	- Immersive playing	- Console or mobile phone	- Escape social and family context - Have fun - Calm down - Avoid house chores - Disconnect from school - Do things that are not possible in the real world
Ashamed-Gamer	- Hidden playing - Performing another identity	- Other people's console (brother's, father's or cousin's)	- Hide their gaming practices from others - Avoid shame due to external oppressors
<b>CULTURAL IMAGINARIES</b>			
Celebrity-Platform-Gamer	- Playing - Recording videos - Editing videos - Advertising their personal brand on platforms such as YouTube and Twitch	- Money - Gaming devices - Accessories (headphones, mouse, room decor, and chair)	- Earn money from games and gameplays posted on platforms like YouTube and Twitch - Be famous - Show off talent - Get followers
Professional-Gamer	- Playing as work - Practicing to improve skills - Advertising their personal brand on platforms - Competing in professional eSports tournaments	- Money - Sponsorship - Gaming devices - Accessories (headphones, mouse, room decor, and chair)	- Earn money as a professional - To be/become a distinguished player - Be famous and be streamed in multiple channels - Show off talent
Poser-Gamer	- Playing easy mobile games	- Mobile phone	- Pretend to be a gamer

The gamer categories summarized in [Table 2](#) are explained further in the following subsections. It should be mentioned that the categories that emerged during the research can be complementary and are not necessarily mutually exclusive, as the practices and cultural imaginaries of video games are rooted in teens' aspirations and perceptions expressed in all the gamer definitions that emerge from their discourses.

On the surface, participants had a similar definition of what it means to be a gamer. Therefore, the main differences were between education centres, so that in each school the definition given by the different genders was similar. Nonetheless, when the focus groups' discussions were analysed in more depth this shared understanding had some differences that were grounded in aspects such as gender, socioeconomic status, country of descent, and other social inequalities.

### ***Catharsis: different realities to escape***

Teens' gaming practices were broadly conceived as a catharsis activity. Thus, we called one category the 'escapist-gamer'. The association between gamer identity and escapism is different between schools. The teens from the public school identify themselves as gamers and define a gamer as someone who plays to pass the time

and escape from their daily life. However, their peers from the semi-private school do not use the same definition. Although they do say that they play to disconnect from schoolwork, the difference is that they do not identify themselves as gamers. In both cases, the definition responds to the Aristotelian concept of katharsis, understood as a purge (or catharsis) that seeks relief, pleasure or serenity (Aristotle, 1920).

In particular, girls from the public school explained that they play video games for fun, 'I like video games to pass the time and have fun' (Camila, aged 13, FG1). Nevertheless, playing video games also serves as a space away from their gender roles, where they do not have to do house chores, such as cooking and cleaning, that their parents usually require them to do. These results connect with a previous study (Radway, 2006) which showed that reading romance books enabled women 'to deal with particular pressures and tensions encountered in their daily round of activities' (p. 86) that were marked by gendered roles.

Nonetheless, in this study, escapism was also present in boys' definitions of gamer practices, as boys stated that they were gamers because they were tired of their real world and preferred an imaginary one. This can be associated with what Burrill (2008) has attributed to the formation of different masculinities of boyhood, in which these boys try to escape from duties, and social and cultural formations by playing video games.

Boys experience the problem of fitting into models of masculinity. In the public school, a new boy from Bangladesh, Waseem, aged 13, who had language and communication difficulties, as well as cultural clashes with his gender models at school, used games as a way of evading the hard reality of adaptation. He stated that he was a gamer because he did not know what to do with his life. Thus, he uses video games to evade his difficult experience of adapting to the new social context that is so different from his family context. This shows the ways gamer practitioners can become subjected to the broader context in which a practice is carried out, as explained by Alkemeyer and Bushmann (2017).

Furthermore, boys highlighted other benefits that video games have for them, 'some- times I come home and I'm very stressed and anxious, then I start to play, and I calm down. It helps me to de-stress' (Josep, aged 12, FG2). Correspondingly, their peers from the semi-private school said, 'video games let us do things we can't do in real life. It's like having a bit of surrealism' (Miquel, aged 13, FG4); and, 'video games help me to rest and disconnect from my studies' (Pau, aged 15, FG4). All the participants identified with the element of escapism. They seem to experience a connection with games that take them away from their daily present. Similarly to the reading strategy that Radway (2006) presented, playing video games is a way to evade the 'physical presence in an environment associated with responsibilities that are acutely felt and occasion- ally experienced as too onerous to bear' (p. 93), generating a new conception of pleasure and entertainment through a techno cultural phenomenon such as video games. Nonetheless, this was more evident in teens from the public school, as their responsibilities are not only related to school tasks, but also to home chores and expectations concerning their gender.

### ***The professionalization of the gaming culture: the professional-gamer and the celebrity-platform-gamer***

Boys and girls from the semi-private school believe that a gamer is someone who 'plays as a professional, who records videos and plays games' (Toni, boy, aged 16, FG4), participates in professional tournaments (eSports), and 'also spends a lot of money on them' (Anna, girl, aged 15, FG3). Thus, the 'professional-gamer' category comes to light and is someone who is a video game professional like a player in an eSports team and who competes at the national and international levels.

When teens from the semi-private school talked about professional gamers, they often distanced themselves from the phenomenon and referred to consumerism and neoliberal values that generate a context of competition for individual victory in professional and ludic terms (Barrett, 2006). This consumerist understanding of what it is to be a gamer was explained further by Anna, who stated that when somebody mentions a gamer, she immediately imagines 'someone who buys a keyboard, a mouse and all that stuff to just end up playing video games'. Thus, this definition of a gamer is deeply associated with the power of having specific gaming devices and accessories, such as a gamer mouse, keyboard, headsets, even chairs and room decor. In other words, to be a gamer was related to having gaming capital. Here, gaming capital is understood as an approach to the importance that skills, knowledge, and experience have in the world of video games, in cultural and economic terms, which surrounds people and the entire system surrounding them (Consalvo, 2019). Nonetheless, it also includes the possession of aesthetic consumerist equipment.

Although two boys from the semi-private school affirmed that their parents support their gaming activities and buy the necessary equipment, teens from the semi-private school talked about the other difficulties of being part of this professional gaming world, 'it's hard to be famous' (Miquel, boy, 13 aged, FG4), and that it requires investment of time and effort. For example, Toni, a boy from the semi-public school, acknowledged the importance of formal studies for his future, 'I don't play during the week. I need to spend time studying' (aged 16, FG4). The teens' routines were conditioned by time, their identification with the gamer category and the need to perform other practices, such as studying. Gaming and studying can be considered competitive practices (Shove et al., 2012) because the time teens spend on one of the practices takes away from the time spent on the other activity.

On the contrary, their peers from the public school perceive games as a chance for them because they think that 'games are the future' (Josep, boy, 12 aged, FG2) and that they may have the chance of succeeding in life through their gaming skills. Teens from the public school conceive the professional-gamer category as a dream and an attractive professional possibility: 'before people believed that football had no future ... and now look! It's the same with video games!' (Haruki, male, aged 13, FG2). This resembles the idea of meritocracy of a professional football player through the legitimization of social inequalities and by abandoning social mobility to individual talent and effort (Oliva et al., 2018). Thus, this category exemplifies how teens incorporate their socioeconomic differences into their cultural imaginaries and, at the same time, how these differences determine their conception

of gamer categories. Teens from the public school see the professionalization of games as a gift, like a dream come true. Moreover, they believe that restraints are imposed by adults, as their parents do not believe in the future of the video game world because they have 'grown up playing with spinning tops and marbles' (Marçal, boy, 13 aged, FG2). The adolescents' socio-demographic situation makes a difference in their cultural imaginary, and therefore in their future aspirations.

The definition of a gamer as a profession can be associated with the formation of the YouTube celebrity system, which is usually based on the imaginary of youtubers being people who have fun and also earn money doing what they like (Ardèvol & Márquez, 2017; Scolari & Fraticelli, 2019). At this point, the 'celebrity-platform-gamer' category emerges. This category reflects some of the consumerist values of contemporary society, as well as the recurrent use of platforms such as YouTube and Twitch, and the need to have a very high number of followers. Thus, a 'celebrity-platform-gamer' is an entrepreneur, who has reached this category due to their self-promotion and empowerment. Again, the participants of the semi-private school recognized the practical difficulties of getting a reputation in the gaming world, 'it's a hard job because as a gamer you have to record and edit videos on time, and you have to keep it up to get followers' (Pau, boy, aged 15, FG4). You will probably become 'a famous person who will have at least one or more people who hate you, and you will have to see them in the street' (Miquel, boy, aged 13, FG4). Moreover, they seem to have incorporated the skills of branding, networking and public relations into their idea of gamer identity (Masanet et al., 2020), which includes being famous as a requirement. In contrast, teens from the public school understand platforms, such as YouTube as an opportunity and 'a way to earn a lot of money doing what you like most' (Waseem, male, aged 13, FG2). Nevertheless, most of the teens defined a gamer as generally a male video-game professional who obtains his gaming public through his expert performances on social media platforms. Therefore, the professional-gamer category sometimes cannot be detached from the celebrity-platform-gamer category. The main difference between 'celebrity-platform-gamer' and the previous one is that a 'professional-gamer' is promoted and retransmitted by third parties due to their video game skills, and therefore they are not an entrepreneur.

### ***The gendered gamer categories: poser-gamer and ashamed-gamer***

As in other studies, we have identified cases in which the female gender is considered the inferior gender and is subjected to the male gaze (Pires & Revelles-Benavente, 2020; Paaßen et al., 2017). This was clear especially when girls affirmed that other players judged their gaming practices in online games, social media, and video platforms such as YouTube. Girls affirmed that they have to go through steps of approval that boys do not have to go through. This demonstrates that female game practitioners do not occupy the same socio-material positions as male players. Boys often watch girls playing to see if they are worthy players, a qualification that for boys usually comes by default. Sexism in online playing is similar to the representation of female video game characters. In video games, they are commonly represented with perfect bodies to please the masculinist gaze (Cote, 2018). In the case of the female players, they have to make perfect moves while playing to please and be accepted by their male co-players. This promotes a toxic techno culture

which valorizes a patriarchal form of masculinity that legitimates the subordination of women to men (Consalvo, 2019).

The girls from the semi-private school state that on top of proving themselves capable, their fame comes after they spend money. They act more wisely and base their possibilities on their initial economic situation. However, their male peers do not even think about this economic aspect and immediately jump this step. Therefore, boys take for granted that they will succeed as they are privileged in their gamer social position. Nonetheless, the girls' awareness of the social and economic context plays an essential role in the individuals in the gaming culture, reflecting the unequal power structures and reproducing patriarchal values (Consalvo, 2012), giving boys a privileged position because of their gender condition.

Another gender issue is the sexism in the language. Language is a product of negotiations over meaning (Mills, 2008), and it is a crucial element of discourses that can maintain gendered social orders (Lazar, 2007). Participants of all genders and schools talked about gamers using the masculine. In the Spanish language, the singular and plural have masculine and feminine nouns. Teens, when referring to gamers, always used the masculine. Therefore, language appears as a tool that reinforces that gaming is a normalized male practice in this particular context. This discourse has to do with the way video games have been seen and reproduced by the media: as 'a kind of "boys" club wherein, men and boys define the industry' (Chess, 2019, p. 93) and the discourses around this practice.

Interestingly, in contrast with the existing literature (Kowert et al., 2017), the ones that explicitly affirmed to consider themselves to be gamers were girls, especially in the public school. They considered themselves gamers because it was a way of defending their identities in the stereotyped context in which they found themselves. In all cases, this self-identification or non-identification is related to the previous gamer definitions that they get from media outlets and their parents' cultural models.

Specifically, girls from the public school understand their gaming practices as a hobby, to have fun, linked with leisure and pleasure. However, their practices were entangled with internal family norms that are guided by a heteropatriarchal system, in which girls play games but do not own their own consoles. Gaming in their families is not considered a female practice in its own right. Moreover, most of these girls have to do tasks usually associated with keeping the home organized.

In the semi-private school, girls did not have their own video game consoles either. Nevertheless, the socioeconomic status of their family was also a factor for this to occur. For instance, although they did not have to carry out household duties, they preferred saving money for other activities and would not 'spend a euro on another game' if they 'already have it at home' (Berta, aged 16, FG3). This participant, like the majority of the participants from the semi-private school, stated that she plays with her brothers' and male relatives' devices because she prefers to buy other products. For instance, another girl stated, '(...) I prefer to ask for another Christmas or birthday present from my parents' (Mireia, aged 15, FG3). Thus, what first appears to be an advantage for these girls due to their economic position, can also

be perceived as the beginning of a process in which girls are more 'watchers' than players. This is because even subtly, they believe that this is an inherently male practice. They are still conditioned to believe that it is not worthwhile spending money on their video game activities. Thus, this context maintains the male status as 'expert', through the reinforcement of the positive association between masculinity and possession of technology (Schott & Horrell, 2000).

The girls criticized a particular model of a gamer related to boys' gaming habits, specifically concerning the number of hours spent playing and aggressiveness in the face of virtual defeats. Moreover, some participants from the public school used archetypical video format vocabulary from YouTube, such as 'Rat Boy', which reproduces stereotypes of toxic masculinity, to refer 'to the typical boy who breaks the television when he loses' (Marçal, boy, aged 13, FG2). Following with the discourse logics, the girls criticized the masculine model of a hardcore gamer. Thus, they distance themselves from this model, and attribute some practices to their male peers. The girls did not allow themselves to self-identify as hardcore gamers because they did not believe in the possibility of a girl being part of this model, which is always associated with men.

Directly opposed to the hardcore gamer definition, but also grounded in stereotypes was the emergence of the 'poser-gamer' category. A boy from the public school clearly expressed this definition as 'someone who considers themselves as a gamer in a pretending way' (Haruki, aged 13, FG2), who plays simple easy games that can't be considered real video games at all because of their simplicity. To explain it, Haruki gave the example of an adult woman that is considered a gamer for playing Candy Crush on her mobile phone. This reaction can be explained by a patriarchal model of masculine identity and norms that surround video games (Paaßen et al., 2017), which demonstrates male superiority and defends what can be considered a male domain. According to the participant's cultural imaginary and preconceptions about the 'poser-gamer', only a woman can pretend and pose to be a gamer. In his opinion, this posing is unsuccessful because women do not fit into the men's understanding of what a gamer is. Once again, a sexist definition emerges. If you are a woman, you probably do not have enough gaming capital. Consequently, you are a poser and cannot reach the established masculine level of game difficulty.

This exclusion can also be seen in what was identified as the 'ashamed-gamer' category, a person who is ashamed of admitting being a gamer, particularly girls. As an example, Alma, a 13 years old girl from the public school, affirmed that she considered herself a gamer but recognized that she does not feel comfortable expressing her gamer identity in front of others. All the girls from the public school had a similar sociodemographic context and were not aware that their peers played video games until the day of the focus group. Video gaming was revealed to be a delicate topic to discuss. In contrast, their peers from the semi-private school, although they were from different groups and courses knew that the other girls played video games. Moreover, two girls from the semi-private school admitted playing online, but exclusively with each other. The rest of the participants stated that they play alone or with unknown people using anonymous nicknames, reasserting their invisibility within online spaces (Paaßen et al., 2017). This situation perpetuates male domination of the medium, generating shame about

talking about video game practices between girls who attempt to avoid gender-based discrimination. Thus, they develop strategies such as hiding their sex or using male or neutral names. These circumstances also confirmed that playing alone (individual practice) may not be understood as a social practice in its own right in comparison with playing collectively; however, both are linked to determinant social factors (Shaw, 2013).

The poser-gamer and ashamed-gamer categories are complementary. From Haruki's cultural imaginary emerges an oppressive category about women's practices with video games.

## **Conclusions**

In this article, the way gender and socioeconomic characteristics permeate the teens' discourses when they define gamer identities was expressed through five gamer categories, two in relation to the teens' practices, 'escapist-gamer' and 'ashamed-gamer', and three in relation to their cultural imaginaries, 'celebrity-platform-gamer', 'professional-gamer', and 'poser-gamer'. These categories shed light on how video games are central elements that are interwoven with the enactment of the teens' everyday social practices and cultural imaginaries.

The results show the complexity of the gamer category through the teens' discourses. Therefore, all the categories determined here reciprocally feed into each other when teens' perceptions around the gamer category and video game world are analysed.

However, through the categories related to teens' gaming practices (escapist and ashamed gamer), we can delve into their understanding of themselves as game players. These two categories show how gender and demographic characteristics are part of their definitions and identifications. We saw that teens participate in a broad set of social contexts defined by identity characteristics like gender, family, and socioeconomic status. The adolescents struggle against heteronormative models of femininity and masculinity concerning their video game practices, which are a reflection of their relationship with the media, their family, their peers, and the video game industry. Although teens negotiate their social position in their gaming practices, girls tend to remain in a secondary position in gaming, sometimes just as watchers because they often do not own their own consoles. Girls use strategies for being part of online gaming spaces, such as being anonymous, so they do not have to prove to boys that they are capable of playing the game. While, boys tend to continue to be in an unproblematic and unquestioned position as players of games, as this was initially considered their domain. Therefore, girls from the public school showed a need to escape from their gendered roles and home duties by playing games. However, boys with the same socioeconomic background also needed to escape their social context through games similarly to girls because they are also subjected to patriarchal models of masculinity that they might not fit. Thus, escapism from different realities becomes a new frame of reference, changing how teens conceive their entertainment in relation to their social and family contexts. Escapism also enables the teens 'to relieve tensions, to diffuse resentment, and to

indulge in a fantasy that provides them good feelings that seem to endure after they return to their roles' (Radway, 2006, p. 95).

On the other hand, the categories 'celebrity-platform-gamer', 'professional-gamer', and 'poser-gamer' are related to the adolescents' cultural imaginary. The gaming practices of the first two categories are marked by cultural aspirations (to be a Youtuber, to be a professional gamer, to succeed in life) or by the lack of them, because teens are aware of their social background; however, the third category illustrates a cultural stigma imposed on women. Moreover, the poser gamer category shows misogynistic discrimination, which classifies women in an inferior category and reduces their video game practice to one specific consumption pattern. Although these categories are not part of their daily practices, teens understand these categories as a way of recognizing others as referents in the world of video games and social platform industry, and a way to aspire to be part of this industry and celebrity system. The teens' cultural imaginary determines their aspirations and perceptions of how they relate to video games. Moreover, the study demonstrates that socioeconomic status is a relevant variable to consider when gaming practices are studied, as the teens' identification and aspirations varied according to this variable. Consequently, socioeconomic status can further complexify the inequalities expressed in the identified gamer categories, including the ones related to their social practices.

This study sheds light on how gender continues to be an important variable to be explored in gaming practices. It also highlights how social status can be another variable because people from different social strata consume video games. In addition, this research opens a future approach for exploring gaming culture by adding socioeconomic background as a study variable that should be researched further.

Finally, video game practices and the categories determined here are a mirror of our societies because they reflect relationships that permeate the everyday lives of teenagers. They are at the core of identity construction, and the way teens perceive their social environment and aspire to their futures.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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