

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# How violence among consumers alters the expected benefits of participation in a consumer collective

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## Abstract

In a consumer society, collective consumption is key to maintaining sociality. However, violence among consumers not only thwarts the benefits of participating in consumer collectives, but also reduces sociality and causes various types of harm. In this study, we investigate the League of Legends gaming community to examine interconsumer violence targeting female gamers and how the mistreatment they experience alters the benefits they derive from being part of the collective. Our exploratory study, based on consumer interviews and auto-ethnographic findings, contributes to the literature on consumer collectives, consumer culture, and gender marketing. Specifically, our data highlight three categories of benefits altered by interconsumer violence—utilitarian, social, and symbolic—each composed of related subcategories. We explain how these benefits are altered by interconsumer violence. We also offer practical recommendations for consumers, community managers, and policymakers to address this phenomenon.

## KEYWORDS

gaming, gender, interconsumer, participation benefits, violence, violenceconsumer collective

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Collective consumption is well understood as a way for consumers to form bonds with each other based on a shared passion for a brand or topic of interest (Arnould & Price, 1993; Muniz Jr & O'Guinn, 2001). Through communal consumption, individuals are thought to gain a sense of belonging and associated social benefits. Collective consumption is important to the social reconstruction of societies and their level of sociality (Schwarz et al., 2023), which Covid-19 reduced “by keeping social distance and avoiding many daily activities like visiting friends and gathering in churches” (Jiao et al., 2022, p. 1413). The social distancing and lockdowns during the pandemic demonstrated an enduring desire for meaningful connections and participation in consumer collectives (Coffin et al., 2023).

Studies show that participating in a consumer collective is a positive experience that brings many benefits (e.g., Arnould et al., 2021). However, this rather optimistic view of consumer collectives is increasingly challenged by manifestations of conflict, marginalization, or tension between members of the same collective (Dineva & Daunt, 2023; Yodovich, 2021). These manifestations can vary in intensity, ranging from teasing or trolling to death threats, and constitute forms of interconsumer violence (Duncan-Shepherd & Hamilton, 2022) perpetrated by one consumer (or group of consumers) against another consumer (or group of consumers). One of the main consequences of interconsumer violence is that the benefits expected from participating in a consumer collective are reduced or lost.

However, violent behavior among consumers has been relatively understudied in consumer research (Smith & Raymen, 2017). Exceptions include studies of conflict between members of rival brand communities (Cromie & Ewing, 2009), between members of a brand community and their opponents (Lüdicke & Giesler, 2007), and hate speech in online brand communities (Oshiro et al., 2021; Sibai et al., 2024). These behaviors place interconsumer violence at the center of consumers' daily experiences, rather than something anecdotal and on the margins of society (Smith & Raymen, 2017). Specifically, such violence is associated with emphasizing differences (Duncan-Shepherd & Hamilton, 2022), such as ethnicity and race, religion, gender, or gender identity (Brandwatch, 2022). As a result, interconsumer violence appears to be an important issue for maintaining and developing a certain level of sociality through participation in consumer collectives.

Although tensions in consumer collectives are known to generate negative emotions, reduce consumer engagement, and create issues for brands (Dineva & Daunt, 2023), we know little about the lived experience of consumer violence and how this prevents some consumers from fully realizing the benefits of their participation in collectives. In other words, we do not know how violence prevents members of consumer collectives from reaping the full benefits of their communal consumption. Given that the targets of violence may remain in a collective despite the apparent harm they endure (Bergstrom, 2021), we need a more nuanced understanding of the detrimental effects of violence on communal consumption. Therefore, we set out to examine how the benefits of participating in a consumer collective are altered (positively or negatively) or maintained in the context of interconsumer violence. This is a hot topic for consumer societies that have become less cohesive as a result of the Covid crises (Borkowska & Laurence, 2021) and are seeking to recreate sociality without being thwarted by acts of violence.

To address this issue, we focus on gaming collectives as the context of inquiry, where gender differences are a source of tension and interconsumer violence. The gaming sector is rife with gender issues and stereotyping (McKinnon-Crowley, 2020; Tiercelin & Rémy, 2019) and is

known to be a toxic, power-based environment that supports hegemonic masculinity (Gray et al., 2017). Furthermore, gender-based hate speech is one of the most common forms of online violence between consumers, with “bitch” being the most frequently used slur (Brandwatch, 2022). The results of our qualitative study show that participation in a consumer collective can differ considerably from what is portrayed in the dominant consumer research literature.

In particular, our findings highlight that the utilitarian, social, and symbolic benefits of participating in consumers collectives can vary significantly. We explain how interconsumer violence and related toxic practices lead to alterations in benefits, and to what extent these benefits are altered. Based on our observations, we propose a number of implications for consumers, community managers, and policymakers to focus efforts on improving sociality.

In doing so, we contribute to the literature in several ways. First, our work challenges the common conception that consumer collectives necessarily bring benefits to their members. Specifically, we evidence that the key categories of benefits in consumer collectives (utilitarian, social and symbolic) can be mildly to severely altered because of interconsumer violence, and we show how this phenomenon occurs. Second, we challenge the dominant thought in gaming literature that portrays online gaming as largely collaborative and supportive. Rather, we support the view that gaming can be a highly toxic environment for minorities, thanks to a focus on female gamers in a highly competitive game. Last, we concur with gender studies in marketing asserting the often limited, controlled or thwarted condition of female consumers in collectives where they are minorities or newcomers. We provide substantial evidence that women lose out on communal participation benefits.

## 2 | LITERATURE

### 2.1 | Benefits and limitations of taking part in a consumer collective

Communal consumption is understood as the way in which consumers with widely differing socio-demographics build, develop, and maintain lasting social ties with fellow community members and make the communal motive central to their identity (Cova et al., 2007; O’Guinn & Muñiz, 2005; Seregina & Weijo, 2017). They thus form consumer collectives, defined today as “networks of social relations that arise around consumer goods, brands, other kinds of commercial symbols, or digital platforms” (Arnould et al., 2021, p. 415).

For two decades, consumer researchers have extolled the benefits of participating in these collectives, not least of which the members’ sense of *wenness* and their egalitarianism (Muniz Jr & O’Guinn, 2001; O’Guinn & Muñiz, 2005). Indeed, one of the basic needs that people seek to satisfy through collective consumption is affiliation, i.e., the need to escape solitude and belong to a social group. However, the benefits of participating in a consumer collective are not limited to social belonging (Arnould et al., 2021). Marketing research, employing uses and gratifications theory (UGT) in online social networks and online brand communities (Dessart et al., 2019), identifies the benefits that lead consumers to engage in online communities, including social enhancement and self-identity. Tourism research has focused on well-being to identify the fundamental benefits that determine the extent to which members participate in the online travel community (McCabe et al., 2010): functional, social, psychological, and hedonic. Transposing the dimensions from the relationship benefits literature (social, confidence, special treatment) to the collective context, Huang et al. (2022) identified three main

benefits of participating in a consumer collective that summarize the previous categorizations: (1) *utilitarian benefits* related to the ways in which consumers support each other to solve problems and engage in collective activities that elicit enjoyment, entertainment, amusement, and fun; (2) *social benefits* through building a sense of membership that consumer collectives provide; (3) *symbolic or confidence benefits* brought about by the power of the collective to influence society, fostering self-esteem and pride. The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the essential role of the collective dimension of societies for individuals (Jiao et al., 2022), and the loss of benefits that occurs when left aside (Borkowska & Laurence, 2021).

Unfortunately, the benefits of participating in consumer collectives are thwarted not only by the deficit of the collective dimension in society, but also by the tensions that exist within the collectives themselves (Lindberg & Mossberg, 2019). Thomas et al. (2013) cautioned scholars to go beyond the apparent homogeneity of consumption collectives and conceptualize them as networks of heterogeneous groups of actors who engage in different ways (Dessart et al., 2019), with the communal motive central to their identity. Some pioneering studies (e.g., Kozinets, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995) have shown how different subgroups can coexist within the same consumption collective. A major opposition highlighted in the literature is between groups of hard-core members and non-core members/newcomers (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), or as Bellezza and Keinan (2014) conceptualize it, between “brand citizens” (core; claiming in-group status by virtue of possessing the consumptive marquee) and “brand immigrants” (non-core; claiming in-group status without consumptive virtue), and even “brand tourists” (non-core; without virtue but claiming no membership status). In any case, these oppositions, which reproduce the canonical antagonism between the “established” and “outsiders” (Elias & Scotson, 1965), undermine the expected benefits of taking part in a consumer collective because non-core group members are ostracized, stigmatized, and excluded by the dominant core group members. All the benefits associated with membership and collective identity are thus diminished, if not negated. For example, Avery (2012) details the tension between male owners of Porsche sports cars and a new faction of women consumers who sought to enter the brand community following the launch of the first SUV, the Porsche Cayenne. After the introduction of the Cayenne, male owners of Porsche sports cars defined themselves as the established group and cast women owners as outsiders. Male owners did not allow women to enjoy the many benefits of participating in the Porsche owner community. In this case, as in others, such as female fans’ conditional belonging in science fiction fan communities (Yodovich, 2021), women do not feel a sense of belonging. For women, belonging to such a collective is not total belonging. As Yodovich (2021, p. 872) points out in the case of women participating in male dominated science fiction fandoms, it is “conditional belonging” defined as “a social, liminal state in which individuals are required to demonstrate conformity to the community they wish to join”.

Consumer collectives can thus be problematic and even self-destructive (Moufahim et al., 2018). They are rife with conflict, where individuals or groups with incompatible goals interact with each other. The presence of conflict in a consumer collective therefore negatively affects the benefits expected from participation, but there is more. Recent scholarship highlights the violence associated with the emergence of conflictual relationships within consumer collectives. Violence can manifest between a consumer collective and its opponents—often members of another collective (such as between Nutella lovers and anti-palm oil activists; Cova & D’Antone, 2016)—but also between subgroups of the same collective (Husemann et al., 2015). Violence exists within the same consumer collective when consumers express divergent opinions in a hostile manner, like in the case of e-sports (Huston et al., 2023). Dineva and Daunt’s

(2023) netnography of five online brand communities shows that within the same brand community, some consumers personally attack other consumers by posting comments such as: “mind your own fucking business”; “find out what hypocrite means before you go spouting your gob off!”; “uneducated moron”. Differences and tensions between groups within a community are said to be exacerbated by digitalization (De Valck, 2007; Hewer et al., 2017; Sibai et al., 2024). For example, on a site organized around culinary matters (De Valck, 2007), discussions about the contribution of recipes to the community's database turned into fierce battles between groups of committed members, using aggressive and insulting language. Although such tensions and contradictions are embedded in the politics of participatory culture, digitalization has amplified them (Dineva & Daunt, 2023).

Interconsumer violence, whether direct or symbolic, visible or invisible, physical or psychological, is thus a significant component of contemporary collective consumption (Duncan-Shepherd & Hamilton, 2022) and should be analyzed in terms of its impact on the consumers targeted and the benefits they gain or lose from their collective consumption. Emerging research on tensions, conflicts, and reprehensible behavior in consumer collectives (Drenten et al., 2023; McKinnon-Crowley, 2020) helps us understand the harmful potential of forms of violence among consumers. Consumers subjected to direct or symbolic violence (the latter somewhat invisible and occurring routinely in the course of everyday life) end up feeling stigmatized, devaluated, and marginalized (Duncan-Shepherd & Hamilton, 2022), even when participating in a consumer collective (Oshiro et al., 2021). Therefore, our study aims to understand how interconsumer violence alters the benefits of participating in consumer collectives.

## 2.2 | Interconsumer violence and group tensions in gaming collectives

Interconsumer violence can be directed at many marginalized consumer groups, such as transgender consumers (Duncan-Shepherd & Hamilton, 2022), other LGBTQ+ consumers (Martin et al., 2020), but also cannabis consumers (Cormack & Cosgrave, 2022). The type of consumer collective that concerns us in this study is gaming (often referred to as a community; for example, McKinnon-Crowley, 2020), and the violence experienced by female gamers within it (Tiercelin & Rémy, 2019). Gaming is known for its toxicity and the pervasive tensions between some of its members (Kristiansen et al., 2023). Heteronormative undertones are commonplace, to the extent that women generally do not feel equally welcome in the broader gaming culture and often need to protect themselves from hostile behavior, especially online (Bergstrom, 2021). In particular, Gray et al. (2017) highlight the lack of attention paid to the actual violence experienced by women in online gaming communities. In fact, interconsumer violence in the gaming context appears to be symbolic in nature (i.e., invisible but routinely occurring), but also visible and tangible, both in the digital realm and offline, reinforcing a culture of inequality against women (Drenten et al., 2023).

Gender-based tension and violence are prevalent in gaming due the persistent culture of male dominance (Drenten et al., 2023) and the resulting power tensions between male and female gamers (Bergstrom, 2021; Tiercelin & Rémy, 2019). Women's invisibility, isolation, and exclusion are effective tools of male domination in games. As a result, research in the gaming industry suggests that female players may lose out on the benefits of their gaming

experience, to the extent that some end up leaving the game or adopting strategies to cope with violence (Cote, 2017; Fox & Tang, 2017), thus not reaping the full benefits of participation.

Violence by male consumers against female consumers has emerged as a form of abuse that prevents women from enjoying the full benefits of their collective consumption (Bergstrom, 2021), but also somewhat reinforcing male camaraderie and bonding. Gender-based violence is known for its negative impact on the physical and mental health of its targets, creating feelings of disappointment, anxiety, and general vulnerability (Duncan-Shepherd & Hamilton, 2022). Studies in the gaming context confirm this understanding (e.g., McKinnon-Crowley, 2020; Tiercelin & Rémy, 2019).

While interconsumer violence is known to thwart access to consumption benefits for a dominated group (Duncan-Shepherd & Hamilton, 2022), this phenomenon remains poorly understood. To date, research on consumer collectives has taken either an introspective view of this issue, seeking to understand the personal fears and emotional distress caused by violence (McKinnon-Crowley, 2020), or an organizational view, focusing on the role of the brand in light of this issue and its impact on organizations (Dineva & Breitsohl, 2022; Dineva & Daunt, 2023). Other studies classify forms of conflict in online consumer collectives (Kristiansen et al., 2023). However, a clear understanding of how interconsumer violence may affect the benefits that consumers gain or lose in consumer collectives is lacking.

We contend that instances of interconsumer violence not only result in people feeling assaulted, attacked, or bullied, but can also extend to their ability to access the full benefits of collective consumption. The paucity of research on this topic calls for an examination of what consumers experience when subjected to interconsumer violence in consumer collectives and how this penalizes or preserves their access to the benefits of communal consumption. To this end, we use the gaming industry as our context to examine what happens among members of a consumer collective in which violence reigns. In particular, we explore how the various collective consumption benefits (utilitarian, social, and symbolic) are altered and prevent consumers from compensating for the current lack of sociality in today's world.

### 3 | METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 | Research context

To explore how the benefits of participating in a consumer collective are altered (positively or negatively) or maintained in the gaming context, our study focuses on a particular online game, League of Legends (LOL). LOL is a multiplayer online battle arena game created by Riot Games in 2009. LOL was the most popular PC game worldwide with revenues of 1.7 billion USD in 2020 (PC Gaming Statistics, 2021) and 180 million players in 2023 (LeagueFeed, 2023). LOL's basic operation is based on two teams of five gamers who must defend their nexus and destroy the enemy's by playing a "champion", but it also allows users to play different versions of the game according to their preference (alone or in teams, more or less competitive, etc.), advancing in rank as they win.

Although LOL is a free-to-play game, Riot Games makes money through a well-established business model. The company has set up a system that allows it to attract the maximum number of players without necessarily wanting them all to spend money. Not all of the game's content is directly available to players. Based on micro-transactions, players have the opportunity to buy Riot points, the game's currency, with which they can purchase these "champions"

(i.e., characters), “skins” (i.e., new traits for the characters), “runes” (i.e., boosts to improve their champions), and other items related to the LOL universe (Clement, 2021). Personalization allows progressing through the game faster. Riot Games generates revenue from the online purchases of the most avid players, sponsorships, and the sale of numerous derivative products. LOL is a game fragmented into a myriad of communities, grouped, for example, on the gaming platform Discord, which hosts thousands of LOL servers or communities (Discord, 2023).

The game is known to generate interconsumer violence, as it is rooted in intense competition and power, even among teammates. In fact, 73% of US players have experienced harassment while playing, and 36% cited the game as one of the most hostile environments to play in (ADL, 2020). Lee et al. (2019) study shows that the game fosters high levels of disruptive behavior among players. As such, LOL is an ideal case to explore the dynamics of interconsumer violence and their link to the benefits of collective participation. In particular, the LOL community is permeated by the internet-based “incel” (involuntary celibate) subculture, a worldview based on two beliefs: their understanding of society as a hierarchy in which one's place is determined primarily by physical characteristics, and women as the primary perpetrators of this hierarchy (Pelzer et al., 2021). This hegemonic masculinity leaves female players as underdogs, as the technological design of the game also fails to empower them. Rather, the company seems to acknowledge the existence of unwanted behaviors through features that allow their suppression (e.g., a mute button, a reporting system). The organizing principles of the game thus implicitly and sometimes intentionally support violence.

LOL's former Lead Designer of Social Systems led “the charge to combat the idea of gaming toxicity which then spread throughout the entire gaming industry”.<sup>1</sup> He created “The Tribunal”, a community vote-based ban system that allowed LOL players to join and then vote on other players who engaged in perceived toxic behaviors. Punishments ranged from chat restrictions to temporary (day or week) bans. Other commonly used tools include blocking and muting players who have said something objectionable. Regarding gender issues, a focus on diversity and inclusion at Riot Games was introduced after the 2018 gender-based discrimination class action lawsuit.<sup>2</sup> Riot Games' diversity and inclusion policy states, “We must not tolerate sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, ageism, religious discrimination, and bigotry of any kind”.<sup>3</sup>

### 3.2 | Data collection

Our study is exploratory and uses a qualitative approach. In particular, one of the authors has been an active gamer in the LOL community since 2017, when she was 18 years old, playing an average number of 6 h per week. She was introduced to the game by her partner, who taught her how to play. She has played all the versions of the game and acquainted herself with most of the LOL champions, lingo, and practices, playing mostly with friends. She does not have a competitive profile and plays for fun in her spare time. Despite playing mostly in the friendlier version of the game, she quickly noticed the game's toxicity and was also a direct or indirect victim of interconsumer violence, which sparked her interest in understanding this problem from the inside. In her capacity as a female LOL gamer and participant observer of the game, its dynamics, and the interactions for the past 7 years, she has actively dedicated time to analyzing the game for a year and a half. This allowed her to gain a deep understanding and genuine experience of the community, a common practice in consumer culture theory research (Dessart & Bressolles, 2023; Duncan-Shepherd & Hamilton, 2022; Muniz Jr & O'Guinn, 2001).

Through her ongoing participant observation (Wacquant, 2004), she also gained an immersive understanding of the practice and the skills and knowledge to build rapport with participants (Murphy et al., 2019).

This auto-ethnographic information and the author's experience formed the basis for a series of interviews with female LOL gamers, facilitating interaction and probing. In-depth interviews allow unpacking consumers' lived experiences through their subjective, narrative accounts (Arsel, 2017) and a discussion to uncover their social realities (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). This qualitative technique enabled probing participants individually, which was essential given the topic at hand. Due to the focus on violence, parts of the interviews were sensitive, reinforcing the need to avoid (social) pressure on participants and to establish a form of

TABLE 1 Respondent profiles.

Respondent	Age	Experience in years	Ranking <sup>a</sup>	Versions played <sup>b</sup>	Play frequency
1	25	3	Not ranked	Arams, classic	5 h/week
2	22	8	High Silver or low Gold	Arams, ranked	10 h/week
3	28	10	Silver/Gold	Ranked, Flex, TFT	12 h-15 h/week
4	19	4	Not ranked/ Silver 3	Arams, Classic, TFT	8 h/week
5	25	2	Not ranked	Arams, Classic	6 h/week
6	19	3	Not ranked	Arams, Classic, all for one	5-6 h/week
7	21	6	Diamond	All, mostly ranked	28 h/week
8	24	7	Platinum	All	8 h to 15 h/week
9	30	11	Gold	Arams, flex, ranked	28 h/week
10	23	7	Gold	All	5-6 h/week
11	24	8	Not ranked	Flex, Arams	21 h/week
12	22	3	Gold	All	21 h/week
13	26	2	Gold	All	21 h/week
14	31	9	Silver	Flex, solo	2-3 times/month
15	29	10	Bronze	Normal, Flex, ranked	14 h/week
16	23	5	Silver	Normal, ranked	4 h/week
17	22	5	Not ranked	All except ranked	1-2 h/day
18	23	3	Silver	Normal, ranked	5 h/week
19	25	8	Platinum	Ranked	15 h/week
20	23	8	Silver	Everything	6 h/week

<sup>a</sup>League of Legends allows playing ranked games. Based on performance and the number of games won, a player earns points called PL. Depending on the level of PL, a player can earn a rank and advance from rank to rank. These are, in ascending order: Iron, Bronze, Silver, Gold, Platinum, Diamond, Master, Grandmaster, Challenger.

<sup>b</sup>The versions of the game considered less competitive are: Aram, All for One, and Flex (Normal). The most competitive mode is Ranked, as this is the mode in which players are ranked. Ranked games in Solo/Duo or Flex are also the first and most iconic version of LoL. This mode of playing is the most emphasized in e-sports competitions.



trust between the researcher and interviewee. Similar to Jagadale and Krisjanous (2022) and their methodological recommendations when interviewing vulnerable female populations under a dominant regime, we sought to foster trust by ensuring anonymity and encouraging open discussion using relevant language and jargon, facilitated by the knowledge and experience of LOL. The interview guide aimed to elicit informants' experiences with LOL, their relationships with other players and members of the gaming community, and specific episodes of violence they experienced. Typical questions included: Have you ever been the victim of aggressive behavior from other players? What was the nature of these behaviors, and how did you react to them? Using convenience and snowballing sampling, capitalizing on the gaming researcher's personal network and social media profile, we conducted 20 interviews with female players of LOL in the spring of 2022. The participants all spoke French, and all interviews were conducted online due to their distance and location throughout France and Belgium. Table 1 shows the interviewee characteristics. Despite the purposive nature of our sample, we aimed for heterogeneity in terms of age, experience with the game, ranking of players, versions played, and gaming frequency. As mentioned, although the game is free to play, several of our informants purchased skins and runes.

Data were analyzed with Nvivo 12 software, following an abductive reasoning approach (Witell et al., 2020), with an iterative approach to identifying themes, comparing and contrasting empirical observations with existing literature (Holmlund et al., 2020). Firstly, some themes and parent themes were formulated using the literature review on collective consumption, gaming and gender studies, forming pre-established codes (for instance, the three main types of benefits of collective consumption). Secondly, after having read all the transcriptions and open-coding them, additional and complementary themes emerging from the data were added (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). For instance, specific practices of interconsumer violence and female responses to them, emerged from the data. We then iteratively coded the data according to the various themes determined. Additionally, some attributes specific to each respondent were created. The coding, analyses and interpretations of the data were discussed extensively among the authors through multiple iterations, until reaching full agreement.

## 4 | FINDINGS

Our study aims to understand how collective consumption benefits are altered or maintained in the context of interconsumer violence. To achieve this goal, our findings shed light on three types of consumer benefits: utilitarian, social, and symbolic benefits, as previously categorized in collective consumption research (Huang et al., 2022). Through these three types of benefits, we highlight what can be lost, preserved, or altered, and the role that interconsumer violence plays in this process.

### 4.1 | Utilitarian benefits

The enjoyment of participating in a consumer collective is primarily the utility value of products through participation in collective activities that elicit enjoyment, entertainment, amusement, and fun. This is a basic expectation of any collective consumption experience. Even if some of our informants do not spend money to play LOL, they invest time and effort to learn, improve, and become successful team members. Our findings show female gamers miss out on

interactions with other players, some features of the game, and the overall gaming experience, because of the violence they are victims of from other players.

#### 4.1.1 | Downgraded offering

In terms of game features, participants indicated avoiding full participation and engagement with certain aspects or functionalities of the game that they would otherwise use. The version of the game women play may be somewhat “downgraded” or limited voluntarily to avoid encountering violence.

Paradoxically or not, violence is understood as part of the consumption of LOL, suggesting that players (female or male) actually seek out, or at least accept, an atmosphere of violence simply by playing the game. Female gamers describe a bittersweet, sometimes resigned relationship to the normalized and increasingly pervasive violence in LOL.

“Many more young people play now and as they see aggressive behaviors, they reproduce them, amplify them, and as a result, the community has become more immature, younger, and more toxic, without really understanding what lies behind it (...) The fact that they (Riot) added “mute” buttons for instance, shows that they understand that the game is too toxic and that answering (violence) is useless. Let's not fool ourselves: there isn't a single report that is useful.”

(Respondent 8)

Experienced gamers nurture the toxicity by indoctrinating young (male) gamers, who try to conform to the norm and copy their aggressive behaviors (Huston et al., 2023). By perpetrating violence against female gamers, they adopt a recurring behavior in the game, but with a certain immaturity or lack of reflexivity. This overall aggressive environment forces female gamers to abandon some game features as it significantly affects their gaming experience and because reporting the problem is useless.

Although sometimes resigned about violence, respondents explained that hate speech received in the chat often destabilizes them during the game, making them feel angry and sometimes losing their ability to play properly. Because of the detrimental effect of hate speech on their gaming skills, they decide to limit or downgrade the features they use. For instance, muting the chat is common. By preventing other players from interacting with them, and somehow becoming lurkers (Mousavi & Roper, 2023), female gamers protect themselves from various types of hate speech. This practice is often undertaken reluctantly, as the game naturally involves helping each other and interacting in the chat.

“In general, I mute my ADC<sup>4</sup> if I don't know him, because ADCs are amongst the most aggressive players. I put in place some barriers, such as muting people. It took me years to do that because I think it's a shame in a game based on mutual help not to be able to read (what) people (say). But after a while, I realized that some criticism could really hurt me and make me play differently.”

(Respondent 9)

Playing in teams with people they know and trust, playing easier versions or avoiding certain versions of the game are other consequences of violence, as is masking one's gender.

“I avoid ranked games to avoid that kind of behavior (aggressions).”

(Respondent 4)

“My avatar did not show that I was a woman, so it was fine.”

(Respondent 5)

There is a clear understanding that women who engage in these types of restrictive practices do so in order to continue playing. For them, the ability to play the game efficiently and peacefully must come at the expense of certain product features: certain game features are thus voluntarily given up in order to enjoy the rest of the game experience and maintain other benefits.

#### 4.1.2 | Forced to let down the offer

This negotiation of the functionalities and benefits of gaming is less nuanced in some cases: leaving the game altogether is the most extreme case of loss of utilitarian benefits as they disengage from collective activities. Several respondents denote the relentless nature of hate speech. Forms of interconsumer violence such as insults, rape threats or encouragement to commit suicide can quickly accumulate and within the game and become unbearable.

Although violence is usually kept within the confines of the games in verbal (in-game voice) or textual (chat, messaging) formats, it can also extend to non-gaming channels and spill over into the physical realm, making it more tangible. In experiencing real-life intimidation, physical encounters, or packages in the mail, respondents show that the violence bred in the game can spill over into other areas of their private lives.

If the toxic environment and the constant hatred become too much for the gamer, whether through in-game or real-life violence, they may decide to stop playing and let down the benefits of the game, thus depriving themselves of the full range of product benefits, pleasure, and enjoyment associated with participation.

“After being constantly insulted, I ended up seeing negativity everywhere around me. It also happened in a dark period of my life. Everything together, it reflected in my daily life, so the fact of quitting LOL was beneficial. The toxicity of the game is really hard for me and a real issue. Since I started playing again, I exclusively play in all mute so as not to get these kinds of comments anymore.”

(Respondent 19)

While some players leave for a period of time and return when they feel better, regaining access to utilitarian benefits, such as Respondent 19, others leave the game indefinitely, such as Respondent 7, the highest ranked respondent in our panel (diamond level):

“I got to a point in my life where I could start living from streaming, and I was almost exclusively streaming LOL, and I stopped because I started receiving packages at home, and people were waiting for me outside of my school... So now it's a few years since I have stopped because it was really traumatizing. They even found my phone number and would call me at night. I received sex toys and used underwear in my mail when I was 16.”

(Respondent 7)

These interpersonal forms of violence are less frequent and appear to be targeted at female gamers who pose the greatest threat to hegemonic male power, namely women who are highly ranked in the game. This trend mirrors the narrative depicted in the Gamergate scandal, in which highly successful female gamers came under attack (Gray et al., 2017). These tangible forms of violence are also the most vivid representation of physical violence found in the data, ending the relationship between female gamers and the gaming community.

## 4.2 | Social benefits

As with any consumer collective, the second expected benefit of participation goes beyond usage and touches on the social connection (Cova, 1997). The social benefit of participating in the LOL community is its value in terms of creating, developing, and maintaining links with other players. Two main sources of value are: (1) a sense of belonging to the community; (2) mutual support among community members. Our participants revealed that they are deprived of these two normally expected community benefits because the cultural norm in the collective creates a male-dominated identity.

### 4.2.1 | Belonging or not

The gaming collective is perceived as aligned with hegemonic masculinity, with norms related to the desire for dominance, manliness, aggressiveness, and sexism, which normalizes gender-based harassment and discrimination and is naturally at odds with female identity. Violence against women occurs routinely, so much so that it is often accepted as a key tenet of how the game works: violence can be very subtle, unacknowledged by its perpetrators, and ultimately imposes a collective meaning based on power imbalance.

The sense of belonging and identification with the collective is thus more difficult for female gamers to achieve. While a sense of belonging is considered a key component of any consumer collective, real or virtual (Muniz Jr & O'Guinn, 2001), female gamers largely reported feeling at odds with the LOL identity. The findings show that almost all use the qualifier “toxic”. Some also associate the gaming community with aggressiveness, rage, childish players, and sore losers. In addition, references to men are used to qualify the collective: “a masculine community of pre-teens”, “of men in need of sex”, or “a community of spoiled little boys”. To ensure a friendly atmosphere and maintain the social benefits, female gamers often prefer to play with a known group of friends with whom they identify:

“I don't feel integrated in the community. I only play with people I know from real life. It's about 10 of us playing in an extend group of friends on LOL. Aside from that, I don't really mingle with others. In the rare occurrences where I tried [to play with unknown players], people quickly became toxic or angry.”

(Respondent 12)

“I do belong to the community in the sense that I have been playing for 7 years now, so I belong because I play a lot...but still in those seven years, I've never developed any friendship through LOL, although I have in other games. On LOL, it is impossible because there is this toxicity (...) So I took my own real-life community

to play with me in the game because I did not necessarily want to belong to the LOL community.”

(Respondent 8)

Beyond these friendly and select groups, respondents indicate that some other players are benevolent and nice, but they remain a minority in the gaming collective, in favor of active perpetrators or bystanders. Indeed, because LOL is played in teams, other members of the team often witness the violence directed at women. However, these bystanders almost never intervene on their behalf: doing so would undermine their own legitimacy in the game and likely make them targets of violence as well. While not always in stark opposition to their fellow gamers, women thus find it difficult, to varying degrees, to identify with mainstream gaming culture.

#### 4.2.2 | Without a little help from my friends

A second change in benefits that is directly related to the aforementioned lack of psychological identification is the absence of mutual support and help (Muniz Jr & O'Guinn, 2001): female gamers often mention they are unable to connect with (female) gamers and form a relationship with them. As female gamers often hide behind non-female profiles and play male champions, they are unidentifiable. Most participants in our panel reported low awareness of other female gamers.

“I have played with other female gamers on LOL, but actually because they were my friends in real life. But I never met a female team player or adversary, or actually they are probable well-hidden like me.”

(Respondent 14)

Since female gamers cannot find or interact with others, they are also deprived of their support, whether technical (to play the game better) or psychological (to deal with violence), which is an expected and important feature of LOL, as Respondent 9 previously noted. Interestingly, when women do find each other in the game, they sometimes enact the ambient violence with each other. They do so to protect themselves from stereotypes and to manage their identity: toxic interconsumer violence ends up generating violence within the minority, further reinforcing the loss of social benefits.

### 4.3 | Symbolic benefits

The third way to benefit from participating in a consumer collective is to take pride in it. In today's world, consumption is said to be the main source of self-expression and self-esteem for consumers (Schroeder, 2003; Stuppy et al., 2020). The symbolic benefits of participating in LOL are the association of social and cultural meanings that allow consumers to express their identity. However, the interconsumer violence that female gamers experience alters the expected symbolic benefits of the community. On the one hand, through stereotyping practices, male gamers prevent female gamers from fully experiencing the identity of a member of the

community. On the other side, and with verbal and even physical violence, they outright harass the female gamers.

### 4.3.1 | Stereotyping

Male stereotypes about women gamers are harmful when they limit women's capacity to develop their personal abilities, pursue their gaming careers and build their communal identities. Indeed, dominant male beliefs link women gamers "to undesirable characteristics—to negative stereotypes" (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 367). Stereotypes are often "automatic" in male gamers speech. Respondents highlight five ways in which women are stereotyped: (1) assigned specific roles, such as cooking, playing the support role<sup>5</sup>; (2) unable to play; (3) stupid; (4) sexual objects; (5) not worthy of living. A large number of participants reported this type of verbal violence, with greater or lesser frequency and intensity.

"Sometimes it is just insults and often 'you can't play' or 'go play support', because they cannot stand females to be anything other than support. Or comments like 'go back to the kitchen, you have nothing to do in a game, it is not your role' ... these kinds of things... Out of 10 games, these kind of behaviors happen 6 or 7 times."

(Respondent 18)

"I get messages like 'dirty whore', 'slut', 'I want to fuck you' (...) very trashy comments, or 'as a girl who plays LOL, you must be very hot' (...) or if one of your allies does something well and you tell them 'well done!', a random player will come and say 'wait, you still have some on your lips.'"

(Respondent 7)

As violence manifests through stereotyping, female gamers find themselves in an ecosystem where female identity is attacked, trampled, or at best disregarded. As a result, they are unable to express and live their true female identity and end up disguising, bending, or hiding it. Similarly, they are kept from identifying to the "core" gamer identity of a dominant male. They thus end up in a sort of "no-man's land where they can neither be themselves nor recognized as a real gamer. They therefore struggle to maintain (at least utilitarian) benefits in the game. Respondent 7 shared a tale of a nuanced, evolving, and multifaceted identity struggle in the game. When she first started playing the game, she tried many champions that were not necessarily feminine. Then her ex-boyfriend (who was also a hard gamer) forced her into the stereotype of a female gamer who plays support and girly champions, "*He said 'no, you're going to fit into that cliché because that's the way it is' and that's all, so for a while I was in that cliché and I wasn't having fun in the game*". After getting out of her relationship, she decided to stand up for herself and play the way she really wanted to, "*I thought 'I'm going to play top to piss them off' and now I can play all the roles*". Even if she seems to have effectively coped with stereotyping, she confessed that, "*When I play with friends, I say to myself 'well no, I'm going to play the champions for the girls' because if I play Darius, they'll say something*". Instead, Respondent 7 experienced an unresolved identity struggle in which she constantly alternated between resisting and conforming to the game's stereotypes and female identity clichés. Thus, the reaction of female gamers in front of stereotyping may be the creation of a kind of blended identity, where they decide to continue playing girly roles, but counterbalance the cliché by playing

other roles. In addition to the alteration of symbolic benefits, this identity struggle is thus directly related to a certain (limited) use of product features (such as only playing certain game types or champions), as explained in the section on utilitarian benefits.

### 4.3.2 | Harassment

Stereotyping can take the form of hate speech in LOL perpetrated through verbal or written attacks via the messaging system. Hate speech focuses on topics aimed at undermining, delegitimizing, or excluding female players. In LOL lingo, hate speech is referred to as “flaming”, a form of direct violence characterized by offensive, unpleasant, and abusive verbal attacks, as well as insults and threats. Flaming also includes defamation and sexual harassment (Hwang et al., 2016).

In the most extreme cases of harassment, female gamers are afraid to play. They know that something negative will happen to them. They get a twinge of fear when something happens, and their muscles tense up. Overall, they feel uncomfortable but still want to play. Respondent 7 offered an extreme account of this issue, which spills over into the realm of the game and creates problems for her well-being. She goes as far as to say, “*I feel more like a piece of meat*”. For her, as previously detailed, violence included real-life intimidation, physical encounters, or degrading mail packages. As a result of this violence, Respondent 7 reports having experienced “*post-traumatic stress*” and needed the help of a psychiatrist. She further details that the feeling of not being seen as legitimate when she is one of the best players brought her close to depression:

“At first, when this kind of thing happened (interconsumer violence), I would have panic attacks, I would go crazy and stop playing the game for days (...) Today, I really experience a saturation of these bad behaviors. Whether on LOL, Instagram, or Facebook, it's my boyfriend who handles my inbox. I am unable to deal with it emotionally speaking.”

In case of harassment, female gamers experience high emotional distress (Larsen & Fitzgerald, 2011). To avoid that, they adjust their avatar's gender or traits and name in order to remain unnoticed as women—a clear indication that they dissociate themselves from what is portrayed by the gaming masses, but that they still want to play somehow. These practices mirror the more general aspect of a propensity for self-policing often found in undermined populations (Duncan-Shepherd & Hamilton, 2022). In particular, female gamers show a tendency to disguise, modify, or even suppress aspects of themselves that reflect their true identity and preferences.

Consumers experience these different types of altered benefits from their participation in different combinations and intensities. Some may experience only the utilitarian issues, others a combination of different benefit losses, or navigating through them over time: sometimes losing benefits, sometimes regaining them. The most intense and damaging type of benefit loss results in severe emotional distress, but according to our data, only a smaller proportion of consumers experience this extreme level of distress over long periods of time, which can induce paranoia, depression, withdrawal from social life, and even suicide (Sibai et al., 2024). Also striking is that the participants who experienced the most problems are also those with the highest ranking (diamond or platinum), “*I was less annoyed when I was gold (than diamond)*

*honestly*". Whatever the combination of changes in benefits for consumers subjected to inter-consumer violence, it impairs their participation in the collective to the point of producing significant distress in the most extreme cases and a feeling of not being safe or treated fairly (Xiao et al., 2021).

## 5 | DISCUSSION

Our findings investigating the loss of benefits associated with participation in the LOL collective differ sharply from what the dominant consumer research literature on consumer collectives has presented to date.

First, by showing how interconsumer violence operates in online gaming collectives, we evidence that they, in practice, don't always offer their intended benefits. While consumer research, following Kozinets' (1999) definition, defines virtual (i.e., online) communities as groups of people who share social interactions, social ties, and online spaces for interaction, our findings show that they tend to limit online interactions with other members in order to protect themselves. They limit their participation to certain aspects of the game, and even stop playing, thus losing most of the utilitarian benefits of participating in the collective. This echoes research on lurking behavior in online communities, whereby support from the brand and community identity are key in maintaining members active (Mousavi & Roper, 2023). Previous studies have also found that consumers leave consumption communities due to inevitable life transitions (Goulding et al., 2002), changes in the object of passion (Parmentier & Fischer, 2015), or an increase in instrumental costs to support participation (Seregina & Weijo, 2017). Our results highlight that consumers may also downgrade features or leave the community because of verbal violence perpetrated by the dominant group within the community (Sibai et al., 2024).

This challenges our informants' sense of belonging and the acquisition of social benefits, when "the most important element of community is consciousness of kind" (Muniz Jr & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 418), and that members should share "we-ness". The second most important defining characteristic of communities is support, manifested "through actions to help fellow community members repair the product or solve problems with it. The moral responsibility to provide assistance not only manifests itself in helping fix problems, it is also apparent in the sharing of information" (Muniz Jr & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 425). Our informants do not experience this support and have to play without the help of their "peers". Although "participation does increase one's likelihood of helping fellow members" (Thompson et al., 2016, p. 291), in some cases our informants experienced that their participation reduces the likelihood of others helping them and thus the social benefits of participation.

In fact, the LOL collective is far from the safe haven of self-restoration that consumer research advocates for communities (Cova et al., 2007). Rather than resolving their identity ambiguity through participating in the collective (Seregina & Schouten, 2017), our informants struggle to express and live their true identities. Instead of being allowed to safely experiment with alternative selves (Kozinets, 2001; Seregina & Schouten, 2017), they tend to disguise, modify, or even suppress aspects of themselves in order to avoid violence from other members. All this led our informants to a state of extreme emotional distress and loss of symbolic benefits, when forming emotional relationships with other members of the collective is supposed to support self-construction (Schembri & Latimer, 2016).

A major characteristic of a consumer collective that leads to such a toxic context, in addition to the masculine consumer culture, is the existence of a competitive atmosphere. When the



cardinal value shared by all members of a collective like LOL is competition, even if the administrator and gamers call for mutual aid, this has the potential to annihilate the sense of community. What is important for the gamer is to win at all costs and get the best score, not to help others play. In the context of obstacle racing, Weedon (2015, 2016) has shown the difference between the Spartan race, which is run as an individual, and the Tough Mudder race, which is run as a team of 8–10 runners. In the former, what counts is the individual race time of each runner, in the latter, that all the members of a team reach the end together. When we compare the collectives generated around these two brands, we can see that the Mudder community is much more benevolent toward others than the Spartan community. The majority of consumer collectives studied so far (Arnould et al., 2021; Muniz Jr & O'Guinn, 2001) tend to involve groups in which the cardinal value is mutual aid, as with Tough Mudder, rather than competition, as with Spartan or LOL.

Figure 1 emphasizes how the impact of interconsumer violence in a collective is embedded in a competitive atmosphere, doubled with a masculine consumer culture in our case, and how this produces a loss of benefits for the consumer, that can lead to emotional distress.

When we see the extremes of violence that can result from the combination of a masculine consumer culture and a competitive atmosphere, we have to wonder why some women persist in remaining in such a collective that makes them feel uncomfortable and unsafe. Sibai et al. (2024) in their study of an electronic dance music community detail a case in which core members of a community “‘give her [a female dancer] a load of shit’ until she leaves”. They argue that people like this dancer remain because of the significant friendships, intimacy, and sense of family gained in this community. In other words, even if social benefits are impaired, they are still an important part of this person's life. We find the same phenomenon with LOL female gamers who are linked online to certain players and also bring in the game their real-life friends. More broadly speaking, there is never a complete loss of the three benefit categories, and some consumers are satisfied with what's left, whether these are predominantly utilitarian, social or symbolic benefits, or a combination.

Second, we contest the dominant thought in gaming literature portraying online gaming as largely collaborative and supportive and show its toxicity. It could be argued that the consumer

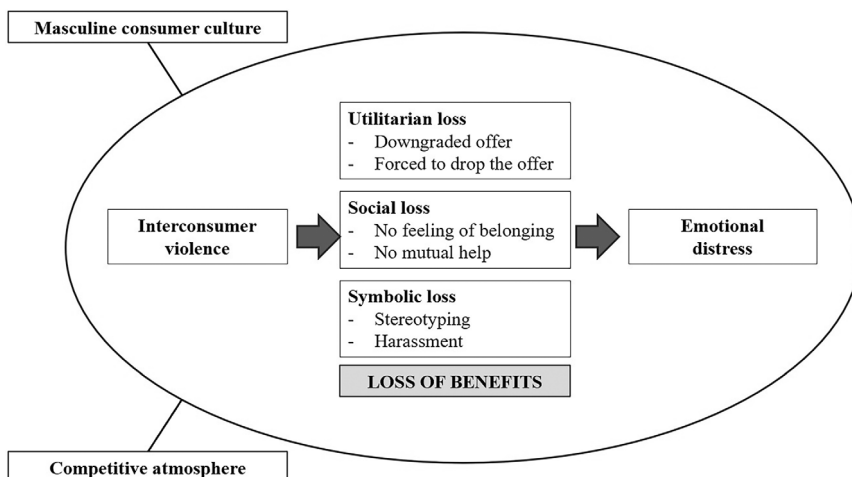


FIGURE 1 How consumer benefits are altered by interconsumer violence.

research literature has paid limited attention to gaming collectives and that they function differently because they usually involve a challenge or conflict that the player or their character must overcome. In fact, most players face anti-social behavior: it is part of the gaming culture. “Industry research suggests that 72% of multiplayer gamers have witnessed toxicity, 68% of gamers have experienced toxicity themselves, and 67% are likely to stop playing a game if they encounter toxicity from another player” (Huston et al., 2023). However, an analysis of the literature on participation in gaming collectives seems to confirm the utilitarian, social, and symbolic benefits of participation found in consumer research, thus contradicting our findings. Several studies on massively multiplayer online roleplaying games (MMORPGs)—such as *World of Warcraft* (WoW)—argue that within communities, players who share interest in MMORPGs “convene, interact, and collaborate with fellow players and achieve game-related outcomes” (Badrinarayanan et al., 2014, p. 853). Rather than places where interactions are limited, as described by our informants, participation in these gaming communities can “stimulate interaction and bonding around a common goal for its players” (Petrică, 2015, p. 27). The gaming literature describes a few cases of people leaving the community (Badrinarayanan et al., 2014; Petrică, 2015), but generally for reasons related to the evolution of the game or the players rather than the community. In fact, in their study of the WoW gaming community, O’Connor et al. (2015, p. 466) state, “All participants reported experiencing a sense of community associated with WoW, a feeling that there was something that connected WoW players with each other. This sense of community was perceived as one of the best things about the game, providing them with a sense of belonging that may have been lacking in their offline lives”. Again, an entirely positive view of participation in a gaming collective conflicts with our findings about the loss of symbolic benefits expected from participation.

Last, we contribute to the examinations of the gendered experiences and implications of consumer collectives, asserting the often limited, controlled or thwarted condition of female consumers in collectives where they are minorities or newcomers. Indeed, gender studies focusing on consumer collectives and gaming communities (Drenten et al., 2023), show women resisting or bowing to male hegemony (Visconti et al., 2018). Whether in consumer studies in general (Avery, 2012), fandom studies (Yodovich, 2021), or gaming communities (McKinnon-Crowley, 2020), research conducted by women supports our findings regarding the loss of benefits within consumer collectives. Studies on gendered experiences in gaming show that the tale women are told is that they could belong and be welcomed in gaming communities if they enact the dominant player profile (White, male, straight). However, marginalized players often find this tale to be a lie (Mejeur & Cote, 2021).

Avery’s (2012) study of the relationship between female Porsche owners and the rest of the very masculine owner community, or Yodovich’s (2021) study of the relationship between female Doctor Who and Star Wars fans and the rest of the science fiction fandom, or McKinnon-Crowley’s (2020) autoethnography of a female Magic player among men, extend the scope of our findings. In these three collective contexts, women’s interactions with the rest of the community are restricted by men because they are not considered legitimate. Consistent with our findings, “for most female fans, interactions with their male counterpart did not raise feelings of intimacy and togetherness” (Yodovich, 2021, p. 881), thus limiting their interactions with the rest of the collective. As a result, women may disengage, go silent, leave the community, or abandon the idea of playing in tournaments (McKinnon-Crowley, 2020), losing the utilitarian benefits of participation. For a woman, belonging to such a collective is not complete belonging. As our study highlights, when searching for help, women find “unhelpful and alienating responses” in the collective (McKinnon-Crowley, 2020, p. 133), and thus lose social

benefits. The women in these three studies, as well as in our study, struggle to express their identities because, for example, “the decision of whether one is worthy of Porsche’s gender identity meanings is adjudicated by the members of the Porsche brand community, who designate which owners belong in the group and which do not” (Avery, 2012, p. 331). This pushes them to self-police their gender identity by “the silencing of their feminist identities and perspectives” (Yodovich, 2021, p. 871) and disguising themselves as a “bro” to reap the benefits of the bro code (McKinnon-Crowley, 2020). In all cases, women experience high levels of distress (Duncan-Shepherd & Hamilton, 2022) due to their gender difference, losing the symbolic benefits of participation.

Our work contributes to the research on gendered experiences in consumer collectives by highlighting the role of interconsumer violence in lessening benefits of being a woman in a male-driven community. Although gaming can be considered an inherently toxic and competitive gaming environment that may fuel violence toward all types of players, we stress the need to consider gender-based violence, as gender is one of the strongest expressions of a person’s core and intimate identity, as well as a marker of consumption experiences (Peñaloza et al., 2023). Gendered-based violence is often stereotyping, sexually connotated and deeply disturbing because grappling with one’s deepest expression of self and identity. As in many other industries like academia or the military, women and other gender minorities are still disproportionately impacted by interconsumer violence (Dobscha and GENMAC, 2021) because of a dominant masculine culture.

## 6 | CONCLUSION: PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

We have taken the case of women in gaming collectives as an emblematic example of how individual consumers can lose out on the benefits of participating in a consumer collective if they belong to an outsider group. We now use this case to envision how the three categories of benefits we highlight (utilitarian, social, symbolic) might be restored and thus contribute to improving today’s level of sociality. To this end, we consider that the marketplace can be used by consumers, community managers, and policymakers to push back against interconsumer violence and try to transform the kind of hegemony – here gender hegemony – that supports this violence (Drenten et al., 2021). By community managers, we mean those in charge of creating, developing, and maintaining online consumer collectives, whether members of a corporation or other organization.

In terms of the utilitarian benefits, community managers could mobilize male consumers who, either individually or collectively, can actively resist hegemonic norms and initiate gender roles changes (Visconti et al., 2018) to develop more positive and enriching interactions with women. More generally, enablers of consumer collectives should take care to avoid the polarization of interactions and the “echo chamber” phenomenon (Gillani et al., 2018) in which people tend to discuss issues only with other like-minded people, and ensure that the most open-minded members of the established group interact positively with members of the outsider group. In a gaming collective, community managers need to support gamers who have canceled their accounts or stopped playing for an abnormal amount of time, offering anonymous support so that they can express themselves and point out the reasons for leaving the game. On a general level, community managers should enable consumers to express their reasons for leaving the collective and try to ensure their return under safe conditions.

In terms of social benefits, the key to participation is to push gaming companies to combat the notion of “conditional belonging” (Yodovich, 2021). It is not easy, because these companies are profit-driven and traditionally resistant to making such changes. However, more and more voices are being raised to criticize the bastion of machismo and sexism that is the world of games (<https://gamertop.fr/enquete-ifop/>). These voices are calling gaming companies to account and urging them to remedy this state of affairs. Without action on their part, it is to be feared that a #Metoo-style movement will develop and upset this universe by impacting the companies' commercial activity. To avoid this, as is beginning to be the case in the fashion industry (Visconti et al., 2023), gaming companies need not only to alter existing meanings of masculinity/femininity, but also to radically dismantle these categories and remove the badge of “conditional belonging” attached to female gamers. To this end, male players who witness violence against women should be supported by community managers to intervene on behalf of women and fight against their stigmatization. As they risk undermining their own legitimacy, these male players need to find an additional form of recognition in performing such actions. This could be provided by community managers or policymakers, but most importantly by reducing power differentials between members of the established group of males and the outsider group of females (Elias & Scotson, 1965). Concerning mutual aid, female consumers should support each other within their socially marginalized group and thus exercise collective power (Visconti et al., 2023). This could begin by allowing female gamers to recognize each other without male gamers seeing. The goal is not to increase polarization, but to develop mutual support between outsiders who often withdraw into themselves.

In terms of the symbolic benefits, it is important to ensure that members of a collective are able to express their identity and are respected for doing so, as collectives are supposed to be a safe haven for identity development (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Several means can be used to help women regain their identity expression in games and feel proud to be women, rather than self-policing and feeling like underdogs. First, the reporting system in games should be more efficient. Community managers should be empowered to implement a more radical ban system, with more severe sanctions for those who flame others in the game. Artificial intelligence is already implemented in the reporting system of certain games, including LOL, but it could also be used to automatically detect certain words or sentiments in the chat features to block their authors under certain conditions without the need for reporting. Of course, such measures require human verification a posteriori to avoid robot misbehavior. Second, at the societal level, policymakers need to educate young people about what sexual harassment is and how to recognize it. More specifically, they should educate young boys about harassment and discrimination, and how these forms of violence in online games can harm female players, while also reminding them that gaming is for everyone. Policymakers can also inform parents and educators about the realities and dangers of online gaming so that parents can better advise their children. To support victims of emotional distress, policymakers can provide safe platforms to discuss these issues, whether as victims, observers, or just citizens, and generally protect girls and women after harassment episodes. The various initiatives that policymakers can propose can be operationalized through public advertising campaigns and media exposure, engagement in schools and training of educators, as well as support from specialized groups such as Young Gamers and Gamblers Education Trust (YGAM). Beyond the specific gaming context, policymakers need to take advantage of all these opportunities to support inclusive consumer collectives in all industries, so that collectives remain sites for harmonious identity development (Thompson, 2014).

Beyond these practical implications, our study contributes to the literature on the benefits of participating in a consumer collective (Dessart et al., 2019; Huang et al., 2022). We evidence that the tripartite categorization of utilitarian/social/symbolic benefits provides a relevant observational grid that can be detailed and expanded depending on the context. We also offer an understanding of the ways in which interconsumer violence alters these benefits and to which extent. This makes it possible to see how these benefits are altered, but generally not completely eliminated, by phenomena such as interconsumer violence. Rather than remaining at the micro-level of benefits for individual consumers, we also consider the more macro aspects, envisioning the deeper effects that interconsumer violence has on social cohesion (Borkowska & Laurence, 2021).

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on people's perceptions of cohesion within their collectives, particularly for vulnerable groups (Jiao et al., 2022), such as the gender minorities we examine in our study. Because of interconsumer violence, consumer collectives can create opposition, if not polarization, between the established group and the outsider group (Elias & Scotson, 1965), resulting in a loss of benefits from participating in these collectives, and thus their level of sociality. While Borkowska and Laurence (2021) suggest that online platforms could have compensated for the loss of collective cohesion experienced during the pandemic, our research shows that this is not the case, quite the opposite. Therefore, we need to mobilize community managers, policymakers, and consumers to take action, with targeted interventions for each of the affected benefits. The goal is to rebuild social cohesion within consumer collectives to raise the level of sociality.

To understand whether and how the benefits of participating in a consumer collective can be modified, future research should expand the scope of investigation to consumer collectives in different industries. For example, the specificities of women in the gaming industry could be enriched by other contexts where differences between groups are not as obvious or visible, as suggested by Elias and Scotson (1965). This could also help shed light on the conditions under which the benefits of participation can be modified, beyond interconsumer violence.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

**Laurence Dessart:** Conceptualization; formal analysis; project administration; supervision; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Bernard Cova:** Conceptualization; project administration; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Native Davignon:** Data curation; investigation; methodology.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.esportsheaven.com/features/the-toxic-psychology-of-riot-lyte/>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/video-games/2022/08/10/riot-games-diversity-report-lawsuit/>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.riotgames.com/en/diversity-and-inclusion>.

<sup>4</sup> ADC stands for “Attack Damage Carry” and refers to champions focused on physical damage to all the enemy team.

<sup>5</sup> Support is one of the five LOL roles and is designed to help another (stronger, more damaging) player (called the ADC) by healing, shielding, or other types of boosts or protection.

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