



Gender Discrimination in Virtual Gaming Communities: Experiences and Coping Strategies among Female Players in Vietnam's League of Legends Community

Nguyen Thi Kim Nhung*, Nguyen Tran Thuc Quyen**, Dinh Phuong Thao**,
Tran Ha Anh**, Pham Tu Chi**

Abstract: Online gaming has become a significant aspect of modern society, driven by the development of digital technology and attracting millions of players worldwide. As a result, issues of general and gender discrimination have gained increased attention in recent years, as more women participate in online gaming but often face harassment, exclusion, and stereotyping. This article examines female players' experiences and perceptions of gender discrimination within the Vietnam League of Legends community, as well as their coping strategies. Results from an online survey of 169 female players and semi-structured interviews with 14 male players and four female players reveal that female players have faced gender discrimination – including verbal abuse featuring offensive language, derogatory comments about their intelligence, and doubts about their gaming skills – which diminishes their sense of belonging to the League of Legends community. To cope with this discrimination, female players tend to avoid, deny, or conceal their gender, which perpetuates male dominance in online games and excludes females, and reduces their motivation to engage in online gaming communities. Therefore, the study suggests that Riot Games and other stakeholders in Vietnam should implement a coordinated system that combines AI-powered reporting, transparent disciplinary procedures, partnerships with eSports organizations, gender-specific safe spaces, and educational programs to create a more inclusive, fair, and respectful gaming environment for all players.

Keywords: gender discrimination; online gaming; female players; coping strategies; Vietnam's League of Legends.

Received: 7th October, 2025; Revised: 18th November, 2025; Accepted: 18th April, 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33100/jossh.2026.2.1.10>

1. Introduction

Online gaming has expanded and now attracts broad participation. However,

gender disparities between men and women persist, and online sexual harassment remains a common problem that

* University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Hanoi;
email: kimnhung86@gmail.com

** Student of University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Hanoi.

disadvantages female players (Rahtula 2024). Gender discrimination against women in online gaming is a prevalent issue that has attracted much attention from researchers and communities due to the increasing rate of female participation. Previous research has consistently reported that an increasing number of female gamers experience discrimination in online gaming (Drča 2022, Kumar 2023, Rahtula 2024). For instance, Kumar (2023) noted in a 2021 study that 77% of female gamers in the US, China, and Germany had experienced gender-based harassment, such as name-calling, insults, sexual messages, gatekeeping, patronizing comments, and negative judgments about their skills. In a 2023 study, 49% of female gamers in the UK reported being abused or harassed while playing online games, with the rate rising to 75% for women aged 18 to 24 years (Sky 2023). A survey conducted by Rahtula (2024) also reported similar figures, indicating that 76% of women had observed, or directly experienced, gender-based discrimination in online gaming communities. Furthermore, Rahtula noted that the proportion of female gamers participating in online gaming and making regular game purchases has increased over the years, with nearly half of all gamers worldwide being female, suggesting that gender discrimination might become more evident.

Along with the increasing rate of gender discrimination against women, prior studies have revealed that various forms of gender discrimination appear in online games. These include harassment and insults, as well as stereotypes about ability—such as the belief that women are unable to perform as well as men—and the fact that the anonymity of online games can exacerbate harassment and violence because players do not feel responsible for their actions (Davies

et al. 2020). Additionally, women are often accused of having hidden motives for playing games, such as seeking a sexual partner or trying to appear special rather than truly enjoying the activity. They are also criticized for losing games (Drča 2022, Ghazzawi 2023). Several studies have shown that gender discrimination against women is reflected in the way female characters are perceived, such as the oversimplification of female characters — for example, portraying them as innocent and pure (Deng 2024) or highlighting their sexual appearance — while the depiction of male characters emphasizes their strength and performance ability (Choe et al. 2019).

Discrimination against women in online gaming can lead to a number of social and psychological consequences. For instance, Kumar (2023) argued that gender discrimination in online gaming can cause mental health problems and negatively affect feelings of well-being and motivation among female gamers, who often experience anxiety, loneliness, fear of attack, depression, and suicidal thoughts. Furthermore, the discrimination women face in online gaming can influence their future career choices (Davies et al. 2020). Similarly, McLean and Griffiths (2018) reported that several of the female gamers in their study expressed feelings of stress, anxiety, and insecurity caused by negative interactions and discrimination in online gaming, which could impact their enjoyment and overall well-being.

Previous research has identified the common strategies women use to cope with such discrimination. These include playing alone or anonymously, concealing their gender within online environments by avoiding voice chat or choosing gender-neutral gamer tags, and switching to single-player games (Drča 2022). They also disguise their identity by adopting a gender-

neutral or male identity/avatar to avoid conflict and harassment (McLean and Griffiths 2018, Rahtula 2024). Additionally, many female gamers choose to respond directly to harassers by arguing back, or silently build a community to speak up and defend themselves (Ghazzawi 2023). Along with personal efforts, many female gamers also aim to join or create female-focused groups and communities where they can share their passion, receive support, and feel safer during gaming. Some avoid participating in random matches and prefer playing with close friends or familiar teammates to prevent feeling isolated or facing discrimination in teamwork situations (Deng 2024, Ghazzawi 2023). Notably, some female players blame themselves for gender discrimination. This reveals self-prejudice or a lack of ability among female players to handle the situation effectively (Fox and Tang 2016).

Within online gaming communities, the MOBA (Multiplayer Online Battle Arena) genre has surged in global popularity, attracting hundreds of millions of players because of its competitive gameplay, strategic depth, and strong social engagement. According to Statista, the global MOBA market size was valued at approximately \$15 billion and comprised an estimated figure of more than 150 million players in 2023 (Pytela 2025). Among the leading MOBA games, League of Legends (LoL) by Riot Games is regarded as the most influential and commercially successful in the genre. Vietnam's LoL community is one of the largest and most active in the world, with millions of players. However, a significant concern in the esports world is that women still face discrimination and are often underestimated in their gaming skills. This can cause psychological damage, self-doubt, and even self-blame among female players. In the

long term, such experiences may make many female players more hesitant to play and ultimately lead them to leave the LoL community. Although previous research in a range of countries has focused on various aspects of gender discrimination, in-depth studies on this phenomenon remain limited in Vietnam, especially in relation to rapidly growing online gaming communities such as that associated with LoL. Therefore, in light of the persistent sexism and existing research gaps in Vietnam, this article concentrates on two key questions: 1) what forms of gender discrimination have female gamers experienced when playing LoL?, and 2) how do they cope with such discrimination?

2. Theoretical Approach

Feminism is an intellectual and political movement that advocates for women's rights, including gender inequality, universal suffrage and education, and labor rights. Since the 19th century, feminist thinkers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony have fought for women's equality. They called for reforms in political and social structures, especially in education, employment, and women's voting rights. Because of its inherent diversity, feminism is not a single, unified school of thought. Feminist theories have branched into various schools and doctrines over time, including Marxist feminism, liberal feminism, radical feminism, and psychoanalytic feminism. Among them, existential feminism is a branch of thought that developed from the existential philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, especially through de Beauvoir's key work, *The Second Sex*. She argued that "women are not born, but made" (Beauvoir 1949). This idea posits that society has constructed social norms and

imposed them on women, and that the concept of “feminine nature” is not innate. Existential feminist theory emphasizes freedom and responsibility, bad faith, and the “Other” - the second sex - arguing that women have historically been defined as the “Other” in relation to men’s “Self”, rather than as autonomous subjects. Applying this perspective to gender discrimination in online gaming reveals how gender discrimination is not just a matter of individual bias, but a process of “Othering” that denies women authentic subjectivity in gaming culture and virtual communities. In particular, existential feminist views are used in this study to explain the manifestations of discrimination against female gamers in online gaming communities. For example, some manifestations, such as women being ridiculed for their intelligence and poor gaming ability because they are female, can be seen as a way of defining female gamers as an inferior “Other.” This aligns with existential feminist critiques of the denial of women’s subjectivity in patriarchal contexts. Furthermore, insofar as women are characterized as the “Other” in relation to men, this form of discrimination means that women are not acknowledged as gamers. Instead, they are constructed as women first and gamers second, echoing Beauvoir’s assertion that all other identities derive from the foundational statement: “I am a woman” (Drča 2022).

In addition, the social construction of gender approach is employed to explain why female players are often criticized for their gaming skills simply because they are women. Within gaming communities, masculinity is frequently associated with competitiveness, aggression, and dominance (Blackburn and Scharrer 2019), while women are often perceived as intruding into a space presumed to belong to men. This

view poses challenges to women’s participation and social recognition in gaming communities. Consequently, ridiculing or underestimating women’s gaming competence (Rahtula 2024) can be understood as mechanisms through which male players attempt to maintain an existing gender hierarchy in which men are treated as the normative standard (Scidone et al. 2024). In a more severe form of discrimination, female players are sometimes explicitly asked to leave gaming communities. From the perspective of liberal feminism, this can be understood as a form of structural barrier that constrains women’s freedom (Surtinawati 2025). Such exclusionary practices violate women’s right to access and participate in digital spaces, especially in the context of the rapid expansion of digital technologies and virtual environments.

These consequences can lead to feelings of frustration and trigger various reactions or coping strategies among female gamers. For example, some conceal their gender, choose to remain anonymous, use neutral avatars, or withdraw from hostile spaces to reclaim agency and maintain authentic participation in gaming. However, these approaches place the burden of adaptation on women themselves instead of challenging the system, reflecting existentialist critiques of how oppressive structures continue when responsibility for change is placed on individuals. Moreover, these coping strategies might even reinforce exclusion. Conversely, many strategies involve seeking social support to foster solidarity and collective change. These strategies demonstrate women’s struggle for authenticity, freedom, and collective transformation; yet, they also highlight the need for systemic change rather than relying solely on individual responses. More broadly, there is a need for systemic

interventions, including legal and educational measures—approaches emphasized within liberal feminist thought—to ensure gender equity in women’s access to digital spaces and participation in gaming within virtual communities.

3. Research Methods

This research used a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative data collection methods, implemented sequentially: a quantitative phase followed by a qualitative one (Creswell 2009, Creswell and Plano Clark 2011). This study underwent academic review and evaluation by two formal committees at both the faculty and university levels. These committees assessed the research design, methodology, and ethical considerations prior to approval. All procedures ensured voluntary participation, and the confidentiality and anonymity of participants.

The survey questionnaire was created using Google Forms and distributed to members of LoL forums across Facebook and Threads. In the introduction to the questionnaire, we explained the study’s objectives and how participant responses would be used for research purposes. We also emphasized the importance of anonymity, enabling respondents to consider their participation carefully and feel safe when completing the questionnaire. The research team also offered “gifts” as incentives to female participants, randomly awarding 50,000 VND to 10 participants. The survey was conducted over approximately one week and collected 211 responses from female participants. However, after screening the responses, only 169 valid questionnaires were retained for analysis. The questionnaire identified

several aspects of gender discrimination, including manifestations of discrimination, its effects, coping strategies, and a sense of belonging to the LoL community. These factors were developed based on reliable scales identified in previous studies. The following scales were used:

Sense of belonging: The Sense of Belonging Scale, developed by Mellinger et al. (2023), was adapted to measure the degree of community attachment among female players within Vietnam’s virtual LoL community.

Sexual discrimination behaviours: We utilized the Video Game Harassment Scale developed by Fox and Tang (2014). This scale comprised 19 items covering general harassment behaviors and sexual harassment behaviors directed at female players. However, we selected items appropriate to the Vietnamese research context and applied them to measure the frequency of sexism experienced by female players in the Vietnamese LoL community.

Rumination from video game scale: Fox and Tang (2016) developed a six-item Likert scale to measure the severity of intrusive thoughts experienced by female players regarding harassment incidents in digital gaming spaces. We employed this tool to evaluate the psychological effects of sexism among participants within the Vietnamese LoL community.

Coping strategies: A scale designed by Fox and Tang (2016) was selected to examine the coping strategies implemented by Vietnamese female LoL participants in response to sexist behaviors.

For the qualitative component, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 18 participants (14 male players and four female players). Participants for the semi-

structured interviews were recruited in two ways: through the researchers' networks and via an online survey shared on social media. For those recruited through personal networks, the researchers reached out directly and scheduled interviews at a time convenient for the participants. For those responding to the online survey, the researchers posted an introduction to the study and participation instructions; interested individuals voluntarily provided contact information and were selected based on their eligibility before being scheduled for interview. We also emphasized that they could withdraw at any point during the process to ensure they felt safe and comfortable participating. Participants did not receive the questions in advance and were interviewed without intermediaries present. The semi-structured interviews aimed to explore male players' perspectives on manifestations of gender discrimination and their responses to witnessing gender discrimination against female players. At the same time, the research team sought to examine female players' experiences and perspectives in detail, focusing on cognitive, emotional, and coping strategies in response to gender discrimination. This process helped clarify the differences in feelings and responses between the two gender groups.

In this study, we conducted a survey of female gamers to explore their experiences of discrimination in online gaming. Additionally, to broaden the dataset and ensure a more comprehensive inclusion of both male and female perspectives, we also conducted semi-structured interviews, mainly with male players. This approach was shaped by the fact that men constitute the majority of gaming community members. Limited access to female participants, as well as fewer women being willing to participate in the interviews, reflects a broader pattern of invisibility and

hesitation among female gamers to openly share their personal views. Instead, many tend to adopt safety strategies, such as remaining silent or avoiding direct interaction within gaming communities. This pattern is further supported by our empirical findings, which will be discussed in the Results section. At the same time, this situation highlights important methodological considerations for future research, especially the need to develop better strategies to encourage female gamers' participation in data collection.

The scientific research project was carried out by a team of students under the supervision of Dr. Nguyen Thi Kim Nhung. The specific contributions of each team member are as follows:

Dr. Nguyen Thi Kim Nhung: Designed the article structure, served as the main author for all sections, and made revisions based on feedback from reviewers and editors.

Nguyen Tran Thuc Quyen: Drafted the literature review and theoretical framework, conducted surveys and semi-structured interviews, and contributed to the discussion.

Dinh Phuong Thao: Drafted the research methodology section and handled data processing and analysis.

Tran Ha Anh: Drafted the introduction and conducted surveys and semi-structured interviews.

Pham Tu Chi: Contributed to the literature review and discussion, and conducted surveys and semi-structured interviews.

4. Results

The research team gathered 169 valid responses from female players in the Vietnamese LoL community.

Specifically, the average age of respondents was 19.8 years (Standard Deviation [SD] = 1.24), with most respondents aged between 18 and 22. 88.2% (n=149) were university students, while the remaining 11.8% had varied occupations, such as content creator, administrative assistant, graphic designer, model, office staff, or freelancer. Regarding place of origin, 77.5% (n=131) are from urban areas and 22.5% (n=38) come from rural areas. In terms of years of playing LoL, the average duration is 2 years (SD = 2.28), with an average of 1.9 hours played per day (SD = 0.99). Notably, those who spent more time playing LoL daily, and had more years of experience, tended to be older gamers in the survey. Additionally, female players living in urban areas had spent more years playing and participating in LoL than those living in rural areas (mean = 2.35 compared to 0.87).

4.1. Female Players' Engagement Level with the LoL Community

Data collected from 169 female participants used a standardized 5-point Likert scale to assess their perceived social status within the LoL community. Overall, the results indicate that the sense of belonging among female players in the LoL community is moderate (mean = 3.43/5.00, SD = 0.64). The relationships and interactions within this virtual community, along with trust, support, and other factors, influence each individual's sense of belonging as a community member. Notably, the sense of belonging was positively correlated with both the amount of time female gamers had been part of the LoL community ($r = 0.255, p < 0.005$) and the time they played each day ($r = 0.164, p < 0.05$). Specifically, the more time female gamers spent playing LoL and participating in the community each day, the stronger their sense of belonging.

Table 1: Female Players' Sense of Belonging with the LoL Community

Items	N	Mean (SD)
1. In general, I feel a sense of belonging with the League of Legends community	169	3.43 (0.86)
2. I feel valued by others in the League of Legends community	169	3.24 (0.83)
3. I feel like I fit in the League of Legends community	169	2.44 (0.93)
4. I feel connected with others in the League of Legends community	169	3.58 (0.88)

Regarding the sense of belonging to the LoL community, with mean scores ranging from 2.44 to 3.58, the empirical findings showed diverse experiences of community integration. The highest mean score was for "I feel connected with others in the League of Legends community" (mean = 3.58, SD = 0.88), suggesting that despite structural barriers, female players maintain strong social bonds within the gaming community. Meanwhile, the lowest score was for "I feel like I fit in the League of Legends community" (mean = 2.44, SD = 0.93).

4.2. Manifestations of Gender Discrimination within the LoL Community

Based on empirical research and the Video Games Harassment Scale developed by Fox and Tang (2016), we used this validated tool to investigate how gender discrimination appears within the community. The study focused on ten specific discriminatory behaviors appropriate to the context of LoL in Vietnam.

The data analysis showed how often women experienced gender discrimination, as indicated in Table 2.

Table 2: *Discrimination Manifestations against Female Players (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.872)*

Items	N	Mean (SD)
1. I was subjected to verbal abuse involving obscene language	169	3.63 (1.13)
2. I was subjected to sexist comments or insults	169	2.71 (1.29)
3. I was subjected to comments about intelligence	169	3.52 (1.12)
4. I have been accused of cheating or referred to as a hacker.	169	2.09 (1.22)
5. I was subjected to ridicule regarding gaming ability and skill level	169	3.69 (1.00)
6. I was asked to leave the game	169	3.04 (1.32)
7. I have been judged on my gaming ability because I am a girl	169	3.12 (1.31)
8. I have been threatened with physical harm or malevolent curses	169	2.19 (1.30)
9. I have been deliberately harassed by other players in the game	169	2.73 (1.27)
10. Upon my reaction, the harrasser said his actions were in good fun or part of the gaming experience	169	2.82 (1.36)

As shown in Table 2, the most common forms of discrimination (mean ≥ 3.50) were ridicule of gaming ability (3.69), verbal abuse (3.63), and comments based on intelligence (3.52). These represent competence-based forms of discrimination specifically targeting female players' perceived gaming skills. Meanwhile, direct threats (2.19) and hacking accusations (2.09) were less frequent, indicating that discrimination within the Vietnamese LoL community mainly happens through skill delegitimization rather than outright aggression.

Semi-structured interviews with 14 male players also revealed similar results, indicating that male players usually criticized female players' skills through verbal abuse rather than physical harm, as the following quotations demonstrate:

“For example, when playing the game, if the player who performs poorly happens to be female, people might start criticizing her. Sometimes it also involves flirting or making slightly inappropriate jokes. Oh, and there's this other thing—I'm not sure if it really counts as gender discrimination or not, but I've noticed that female players are often stereotyped as being associated with female champions who are considered weak, require little skill to play, or are usually in supporting roles. That's just how I often feel about it.” (Male, 21 years old, student, five years of gaming experience)

“If male players already hold certain stereotypes about women in gaming, then they tend to use vulgar or disrespectful language and behaviors. Toxic players usually say things like, ‘If you play this badly, then why even play?’ or ‘If you play

like this, you should just delete the game” (Male, 18 years old, student, four years of gaming experience)

“If a female player is part of the team and is one of the reasons they lose, most of the criticism is usually directed at her. From the male players’ perspective, women don’t know how to play games. Some still believe that women aren’t suited for gaming, thinking they lack the skills or ability to handle in-game situations.” (Male, 20 years old, student, five years of gaming experience)

Perceiving female players as having inferior gaming skills causes some male players to treat them more leniently and offer them more assistance. From the male players’ perspective, these actions reflect a form of discrimination (benevolent sexism). For example:

“I guess I’m a bit biased. If there’s a girl on my team, I think she’s going to perform worse, so I end up ganking her lane more often.” (Male, 27 years old, officer, ten years of gaming experience)

In a broader context, male players shared their thoughts on female players’ participation in professional tournaments, noting that women have limited access to competitive circuits and that women’s tournaments often receive insufficient attention. This results in fewer women pursuing careers in professional gaming. For instance:

“Lots of team managers and sponsors tend to doubt women’s abilities in games that require quick reflexes and complex tactical decisions like League of Legends. This means female gamers get fewer opportunities to prove themselves.” (Male, 19 years old, student, six years of gaming experience)

These quotations suggest that some male players tend to blame female players’ in-

game mistakes on their gender. This group often engages in verbal criticism, teasing, or making mildly inappropriate comments, reflecting deeply rooted gender stereotypes. Female players are also frequently associated with roles or characters perceived as weaker or less skillful, reinforcing stereotypes about women’s abilities and limiting their perceived agency in the game. These behaviors illustrate how gender biases still exist within the gaming community, systematically undermining female players’ confidence and fostering feelings of marginalization.

The research also identified a significant correlation between the number of years female players spend in the LoL community and their experiences of being “referred to as a hacker” ($r = 0.161, p < 0.05$) and being “ridiculed for gaming abilities and skills” ($r = -0.165, p < 0.05$). These results suggest that the longer female players have been involved in LoL, the more they are perceived as hackers, while they are less likely to be ridiculed for their gaming skills. Additionally, regarding the hours female players spend playing LoL, the findings suggest that the more time they play each day, the more likely they are to face verbal abuse and insults ($r = 0.201, p < 0.01$, and $r = 0.200, p < 0.01$ respectively).

Furthermore, the study found a relationship between specific manifestations of discrimination. For instance, the expression “being subjected to verbal abuse involving obscene language” was correlated with “being subjected to comments about intelligence” ($r=0.703, p<0.001$), “being asked to leave the game” ($r=0.561, p<0.001$), “being subjected to ridicule regarding gaming ability and skill level” ($r=0.448, p<0.001$), and “being insulted or ridiculed with sexist words” ($r=0.435, p<0.001$). This indicates that when female players are cursed with vulgar words, they

are also more likely to experience other forms of discrimination, such as being asked to leave the game, being ridiculed for their intelligence, criticized for their gaming skills, or insulted with sexist language.

Additionally, the data analysis revealed a negative correlation between a sense of belonging to the LoL community and experiences of gender discrimination among female respondents ($r = -0.232$, $p < 0.005$). This suggests that the more female players experienced gender discrimination in the LoL community, the less they felt a sense of belonging. Specifically, certain forms of discrimination were linked to this sense of belonging, with some manifestations showing a stronger connection, such as:

“being subjected to comments about intelligence” ($r=-0.205$, $p<0.01$), “being asked to leave the game” ($r=-0.235$, $p<0.005$), and “the harasser saying his actions were in good fun or part of the gaming experience” ($r=-0.240$, $p<0.005$).

4.3. Female Players' Rumination from Video Game Scale

The research employed a 5-point Likert scale, adapted from the “Rumination from video game” scale by Fox and Tang (2016), to evaluate how female players perceive and process experiences of sexism in the LoL community in Vietnam.

Table 3: Female Players' Perceptions of Sexism Experience

Items	N	Mean (SD)
1. I constantly think about experiences of gender discrimination	169	2.92 (1.18)
2. I find it difficult to forget experiences of gender discrimination	169	2.81 (1.26)
3. I still recalling the experiences after a long period	169	2.74 (1.15)
4. I always find it difficult to dismiss unwanted thoughts	169	2.64 (1.20)
5. I feel troubled by experiences of gender discrimination after a long period	169	2.48 (1.19)
6. I am preoccupied with experiences of gender discrimination after leaving the game	169	2.62 (1.22)

Table 3 illustrates how female players feel after experiencing discrimination in the online gaming community. Overall, with mean scores ranging from 2.48 to 2.92, the results indicate a moderate to low level of psychological rumination; however, these figures highlight issues that need careful attention when addressing gender discrimination. The indicator “constantly thinking about experiences of gender discrimination” recorded the highest mean score (mean = 2.92, SD = 1.18). Beyond causing immediate distress, these experiences may trigger profound

rumination on the roots and effects of negative encounters, leading some to question their self-worth. This research found diverse psychological experiences among female players, with some frequently adopting a rational approach and considering the game merely as a “virtual world”. For example:

“To be honest, at first it was a bit stressful, but then I realized it’s just a game, it’s a virtual world. The people who discriminate against me don’t really know what I’m like in real life anyway.” (Female,

20 years old, student, seven years of gaming experience)

The study results demonstrated that the intensity of post-discrimination rumination negatively correlated with the number of years spent gaming ($r = -0.2, p < 0.01$). This indicates that long-term players are less psychologically affected. This may result from their accumulated experience and supportive social networks, such as friends or stable gaming groups, which strengthen their psychological resilience. Additionally, these psychological consequences positively correlate with players' place of origin ($r = 0.159, p < 0.05$). Specifically, players from rural areas reported higher frequencies of harassment and discrimination more often than those from urban regions. This could be due to their limited access to healthy gaming groups and the internalization of societal inequalities prevalent in their environment. Furthermore, the study found a negative

association between sense of belonging and female players' rumination regarding gender discrimination ($r = -0.192, p < 0.05$). This indicates that the more negative psychological impacts female players perceive from gender discrimination, the less they feel they belong to the LoL community.

4.4. Coping Strategies of Female Players in Response to Gender Discrimination

Female players in online gaming encounter harassment and discrimination, prompting them to develop coping strategies. Based on the coping strategies scale developed by Fox and Tang (2016), this study examined how female players cope with discrimination in LoL. Using factor analysis, the coping behaviors were categorized into five distinct dimensions, as detailed in Table 4:

Table 4: Female Players' Coping Behaviors against Gender Discrimination in the LoL Community

	Items	Mean	SD	Cronbach's Alpha
1. Seeking help	1.1. I asked other player for help 1.2. I told the harasser directly I don't like their behaviour 1.3. I reported harasser 1.4. I discussed with someone to seek advice	2.97	0.94	0.67
2. Self-blame	2.1. I blamed myself 2.2. I tried to endure it	1.92	0.96	0.68
3. Denial	3.1. I told myself it was not important/impactful 3.2. I tried to forget it	3.62	1.11	0.74
4. Avoidance	4.1. I avoided voice chat or blocked the one with gender discrimination behaviour 4.2. I switched to play with my friends instead of with strangers	3.95	0.93	0.50
5. Gender masking	5.1. I used gender-neutral username to avoid discrimination 5.2. I used voice-changing software to conceal my gender 5.3. I did not talk with anyone in the game to prevent gender-based judgment 5.4. I did not disclose my gender while playing 5.5. I tried to present as male in the game to avoid judgment	2.51	1.00	0.82

Table 4 shows that the most frequently employed coping mechanisms in the online gaming community are most clearly represented by denial and avoidance (with an average score above 3.00/5.00). This suggests that instead of confronting or directly challenging discriminatory behaviors, many female players choose to withdraw, limit interaction, or remove themselves from potentially hostile situations. Their choices tend to rely on themselves rather than involving other players or harassers. For example:

“When I first started playing, I often encountered situations that felt impolite or made me uncomfortable in such an open community. So, after about one or two months, I decided to play only with a smaller circle—people I already knew, like classmates or close friends. Many times, I would avoid talking to most other players unless they seemed friendly. If not, I would just turn off the chat and microphone.” (Female, 19 years old, student, four years of gaming experience)

Meanwhile, coping strategies such as self-blame, seeking help, and gender masking are less frequently chosen in the survey sample. However, interview data reveal that gender masking still serves as a selective self-protective tactic for a subgroup of female players. Respondents deliberately hide any gender-identifiable cues, avoid revealing their gender while playing, use gender-neutral pronouns, maintain an intentionally “ambiguous” tone, and sometimes even “pretend to be male” when possible. These practices illustrate an ongoing process of identity negotiation, where players constantly balance their desire for community involvement with the fear of being judged based on gender. For example:

“I wouldn’t show that I’m a girl, I try to keep it somewhere in between ... or sometimes I even act unsure about my

choices. If I can find a way, then I’ll just pretend to be a guy. Like, when talking normally in the game—for example, during ban-pick [...] when I have to communicate—I won’t use personal pronouns. Instead, I’ll talk using terms like ‘you and I’ to keep it neutral.” (Female, 19 years, student, four years of gaming experience)

Furthermore, the results showed that a portion of female players chose to seek help from others in the community, with coping behaviors such as “I report other players for their harassment” (mean = 3.48, SD = 1.42) and “I tell the harasser directly I don’t like their behavior” (mean = 3.21, SD = 1.32) being used much more than other help-seeking behaviors.

Notably, the results also demonstrated significant relationships among different coping behavior groups. For example, the study found a correlation between avoidance and denial ($r=0.416$, $p<0.001$), gender masking and self-blame ($r=0.460$, $p<0.001$), and seeking help and avoidance ($r=0.264$, $p<0.005$). These findings indicate that female players do not rely on an independent coping strategy to deal with gender discrimination in online games. Instead, their behaviors form part of a complex, interconnected coping system. Among these, avoidance and gender masking are proactive strategies, while denial and self-blame are more passive, emotion-focused strategies that are closely associated with normalizing gender discrimination. Crucially, these coping strategies remain highly individualized, lacking the systemic, community-driven engagement required for meaningful transformation.

The data also revealed a significant association between female gamers' coping behaviors, age, and place of origin. Specifically, the study found that

respondents' age was positively linked to the avoidance coping behavior group ($r=0.221$, $p<0.005$), suggesting that older female gamers were more likely to use avoidance coping strategies. Additionally, players living in rural areas tended to utilize self-blame coping behaviors more than those in urban areas (mean = 2.27 and 1.81, respectively).

5. Discussion and Policy Implications

This study explored various aspects of gender discrimination against female players in Vietnam's LoL community, including its manifestations, psychological impacts, and coping strategies. The findings confirmed the presence of gender discrimination against women in the LoL community and identified various forms of discrimination, such as being cursed with profanity, ridiculed for intelligence, criticized for gaming skills, asked to leave the game, and judged based on gender. This finding is consistent with the results of previous studies (Maharani et al. 2024; Ruvalcaba et al. 2018; Scarduzio et al. 2018). Among the various forms of gender discrimination in the LoL community, this research found that the most common one involved ridiculing female players' gaming skills and competencies. This result aligns with the findings from the research of Kelly et al. (2023), which found that videos with female voices were rated as less competent than videos with male voices, even when actual skill level was the same. Similarly, Maharani, Puspita, Aurora et al. (2024) also suggested that gender stereotypes about online gaming skills exist, with women often perceived as not playing as well as men, leading to women being hesitant to communicate using voice chat. These results suggest that gender stereotypes may affect how people perceive female gamers'

abilities, which, if left unchallenged, could further reinforce gender stereotypes among male gamers.

When gender bias exists in a community, female gamers usually adopt coping strategies. This study's results indicate that the most common strategy, denial and avoidance, echoes those found in earlier research. For instance, Scarduzio et al. (2018) classified strategies into three behavioral groups: problem-focused, positive emotion-focused, and negative emotion-focused behaviors. These authors also argued that female players typically employed emotion-focused behaviors, which refer to situations where female gamers tend to normalize the harassment and discrimination behaviors they experience. Other research (Maharani et al. 2024, Passmore and Mandryk 2020) pointed out that stereotypes regarding the poor ability of female gamers promote discriminatory behavior, which in turn prompts female gamers to adopt avoidance strategies—including tolerating, ignoring, hiding, avoiding voice chat, and ultimately normalizing the discrimination. This outcome indicates that female players make efforts to avoid being judged based on their gender, as discussed in Beauvoir's existential feminist theory. However, their frequent use of avoidance strategies also suggests they may fall into a state of "existential inauthenticity," compromising with gender-based judgments and lacking the courage to challenge stereotypes. This phenomenon may result from female players' concerns about their personal safety or from the fact that some have internalized the discrimination. The study's findings suggest that women tend to adopt strategies that place a burden on the individual, rather than prompting systemic change. To continue participating in the game, female players must find ways to deny or avoid

reality. Meanwhile, overcoming discrimination requires a complete overhaul of the entire system—that is, the structure and norms of the LoL community—beginning with changing both women’s and men’s perspectives, especially when women are seen as the “Other” in online gaming.

Interestingly, this study also found a negative link between female players’ experiences with gender discrimination and their sense of belonging in online gaming communities. This research shares similarities with another study conducted by Sarah Hoan Nguyen et al. (2022). The findings indicate that higher perceptions of discrimination are associated with a lower sense of belonging in the community. As a result, negative behaviors common in online games and virtual communities—such as discrimination, harassment, and other toxic actions—can increase social exclusion and weaken community bonds. This pattern is highly concerning. When considering earlier results on perceptions and coping strategies, the data reveal a troubling trend: gender stereotypes may be pushing female players away not only from gaming settings but also, by extension, from other competitive or male-dominated spaces. At the heart of this problem is the widespread but superficial belief that the absence of women in these areas is natural or unavoidable, rather than a consequence of gender-based discrimination that systematically excludes them.

To help reduce gender-based discrimination against female players in the online gaming community, this research proposes several evidence-based, contextually appropriate interventions for Vietnam. First, Riot Games should enhance its reporting systems by integrating AI technology to automatically detect and address toxic chat and behavior. At the same time, they should publicly share disciplinary

actions through official channels, such as the League of Legends Vietnam fan page, to prevent future misconduct. Second, there should establish a collaboration between leading streamers and professional eSports organizations in Vietnam, such as GAM eSports. This partnership would launch extensive “Civilized Gaming” awareness campaigns across social media and offline community events, promoting mutual respect among players and challenging gender-based stereotypes to change social norms. Third, it would be helpful if online gaming communities in Vietnam created gender-specific social media groups with strong, transparent moderation policies, offering safe spaces that foster peer support and social bonds among female players. Finally, we recommend that educational institutions and youth development centers across Vietnam, in collaboration with local Departments of Education and Training—especially in rural areas—incorporate discussions on gender equality into extracurricular activities programming. This aims to promote critical thinking and change perceptions among young people early on. We believe that these interventions, when carried out through a coordinated systems approach, will help create a more inclusive, fair, and accessible LoL community environment in Vietnam that supports all players, regardless of gender identity.

6. Conclusion

This research reported in this article examined sexism against female players in the LoL community in Vietnam. We employed a mixed-methods approach, including a survey of 169 female players and semi-structured interviews with 18 participants (both male and female). Results show that female players face various forms of discrimination, mainly including verbal

abuse with obscene language, comments about intelligence, and ridicule regarding gaming skills. The study also found that these types of discrimination had a moderate to low psychological impact on female players. Consequently, they mainly employed denial and avoidance strategies to cope with discrimination in the online gaming environment rather than confronting the perpetrators or seeking to resolve the issues thoroughly. Furthermore, the research revealed that not only do women recognize the reality of discrimination in games, but male players also notice the manifestation of gender discrimination. Over time, this could lessen female players' sense of belonging to the LoL community, reinforce the perception of women as "Others" in game battles, and perpetuate stereotypes of women being weaker in online games. As online games continue to expand, offering benefits to players worldwide, and women's participation becomes increasingly popular, it is crucial to ensure women have the freedom to demonstrate their abilities and mechanisms available to report violations within the online community.

Nonetheless, the study has some limitations and suggests opportunities for future research. First, it uses a relatively small and exploratory sample, which limits the ability to generalize the findings. Second, the study used quantitative methods for women and only qualitative methods for men. This limits the comparison of discrimination from both viewpoints. Future research could include surveys with both men and women to gain a more comprehensive understanding as well as more extensive in-depth interviewing of female players. Third, certain factors, such as cultural and institutional influences, were not thoroughly examined; the study focuses only on variables, such as age, place of origin, and time of participation in the LoL

community. Future studies could explore these additional factors to better understand their impact on discrimination against female players in the online gaming community.

Declaration of AI Use

The authors confirm that no artificial intelligence tools, such as ChatGPT, Claude, or generative translation technologies, were employed during the research and drafting process. The only software used during the editing process was the Windows version of Grammarly for proofreading.

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