

TOXIC GAMERS ARE ALIENATING YOUR CORE DEMOGRAPHIC:

THE BUSINESS CASE FOR COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT

A white paper by Take This.

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Data provided by:



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- There seems to be a belief that “toxic players” are the core demographic of digital games
- To assess the impact of toxicity on player behavior, Take This analyzed the impact of toxicity on the bottom line using data and insights from Nielsen's Video Game Tracking Service
- Results indicate that toxic gaming communities negatively impact the bottom line
- 6 out of 10 of players reported that they had decided to not spend money in a game because of how other players treated them in that community
- 6 out of 10 reported that they had quit a session/match or quit playing a game permanently because they were subjected to harassment and hate within that gaming community
- 7 out of 10 players reported that they have avoided playing certain games because of the reputation of that games community
- Male players were more likely than female players to take action against hate and harassment in terms of reducing spending and engagement
- Younger players (under 18) were more likely than older players (over 18) to take action against hate and harassment in terms of reducing spending and engagement, suggesting that the newest generation of players are less tolerant of “toxic gamer cultures”
- If the gaming industry wants to effectively capture the interest (and income) of the next generation of consumers, mitigating the effects of user-generated toxicity should be a key focus
- The gaming industry should consider expanding and refining moderation efforts, creating preventative and resiliency-building strategies and increasing strategic and financial investment into community management teams

INTRODUCTION



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While not often talked about in public spheres, there seems to be a widely-held assumption that hate and harassment in gaming spaces (often discussed under the umbrella of ‘toxicity’) remain a cornerstone of these communities because so-called “toxic players” are believed to constitute a significant proportion of consumers. This idea has fueled an unsubstantiated fear that improved moderation efforts against these behaviors would essentially moderate out a core game playing demographic. But is this the case?

Various forms of hate and harassment are frequent in gaming spaces. Recent reports from the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) note that 77% of adult online multiplayer gamers surveyed reported experiencing severe harassment, up from 65% in 2019 (ADL, 2022). The prevalence of these kinds of behaviors have come to be so commonplace that many are referring to them as not only normalized, but “culturally justified behaviors within gaming communities” (Kowert & Crevoshay, 2022).

While it is important to draw attention to the frequency of these experiences in gaming communities and understand its mental health impact on those who are experiencing and witnessing these actions, it remains unclear what consequences these actions have on player behavior. Would more effective moderation of toxic behaviors in games negatively impact the bottom line? Are toxic players truly games’ core demographic?

This year, we gained the first insight into how toxicity and revenue are related. Looking at game players aged 13 – 25, researchers found that the average monthly amount of money spent on games deemed “non toxic” as compared to “toxic” was a difference of 54% (Steinkuehler, 2023). That is, there was a 54% gain in revenue for games that “don’t sell consumers spewing name calling, racial epithets, holocaust denial, misogyny, threats to one’s safety, and your garden variety rape and death threats” (p. 1).

CURRENT RESEARCH

Building on this work, Take This wanted to further examine the relationship between toxic communities and revenue. Nielsen, a global leader in data and analytics, polled 2,328 adolescents and adults residing in North America¹ about their experiences with gaming communities to examine the impact of toxicity on spending and engagement behaviors.

Results indicate that toxic gaming communities negatively impact the bottom line.

61%

of players stated they had, at least once, decided not to spend money in a game because of how other players treated them.

24%

of players reported they very often decided to not spend money in a game because of other players' behavior.

Sixty-one percent of players reported that they had, at least once, decided to not spend money in a game because of how other players treated them in that community. Nearly a quarter (24%) reported they did so often or very often.

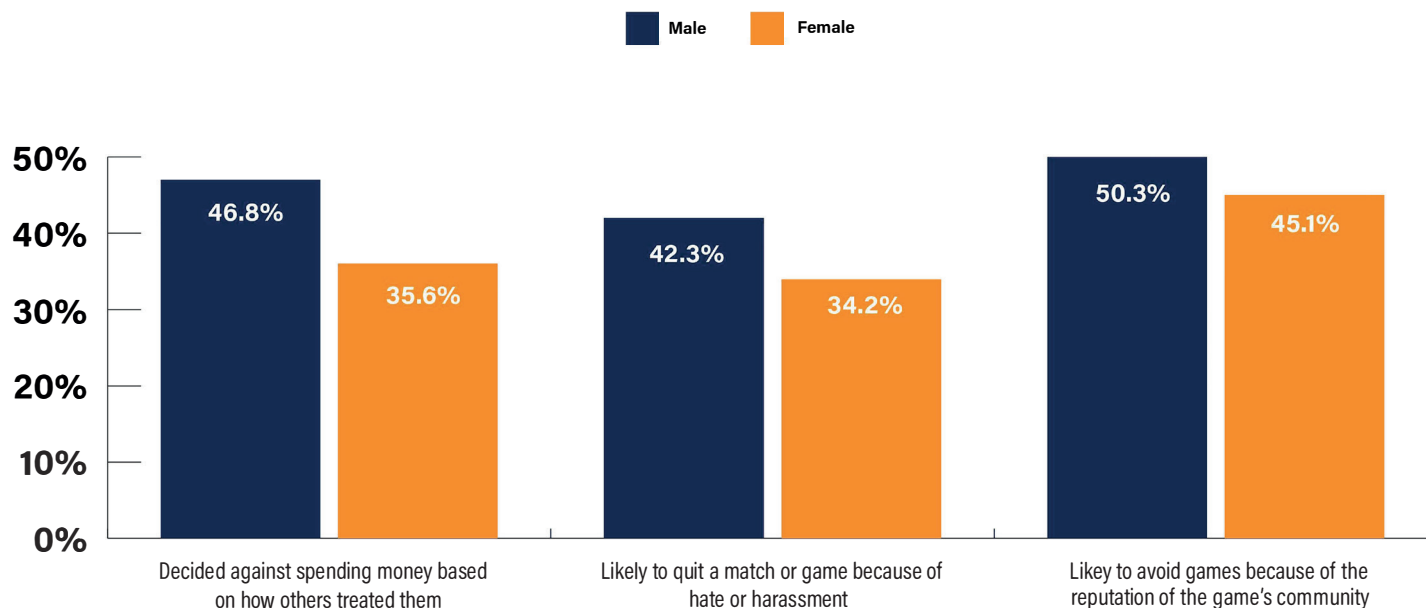
Sixty percent of players reported that they had, at least once, quit a session/match or quit playing a game permanently because they were subjected to harassment and hate within that gaming community. Nearly a quarter of participants (23%) reported they did so often or very often.

Seventy-two percent of players reported that they have avoided playing certain games because of the reputation of that game's community. Just over a quarter (27%) reported they did so often or very often.

Notably, male players were more likely to report a change in behaviors due to toxic community actions than female players. Male players reported being more likely to decide against spending money based on how others treated them (46.8% male, 35.6% female), were more likely to quit a match or game because of hate or harassment (42.3% male, 34.2% female) and were more likely to report avoiding games because of a community's reputation (50.3% male, 45.1% female).

¹ Demographically, the participants were relatively diverse. 59.2% male, 39.4% female, 1.3% other, 0.1% prefer not to say. Participants' ages ranged from 7 to 54, though most participants fell within the age groups of 25 - 34 (36.1%) or 35 - 54 (39.9%). Data was collected between April 24th, 2023 - May 7th, 2023.

CHANGES IN BEHAVIOR DUE TO TOXIC COMMUNITY ACTIONS BY GENDER



Additional statistical information, including significance and effect size, can be found in the appendix.

The behavioral impact of harassment on spending and engagement was also more pronounced among younger players (age 7-17) than older ones (aged 18+). Younger players were more likely to note that, at least sometimes, they decided to not spend money in-game because of how other players treated them (52% under 18, 42% over 18), have quit a session/match because they were subjected to hate or harassment within the community (50% under 18, 39% over 18) and have avoided certain games because of the reputation of the games' community (59% under 18, 49% over 18). This suggests that the tolerance for toxicity in games is lessening with the newest generation of players.

Moving Forward

This data presents a strong business case against the assumption that toxic game players are games' core demographic, and the data demonstrates a negative link between toxic gaming communities and the bottom line. Players are less willing to spend money and engage in gaming spaces where hate and harassment are evident, with the newest generation of players being less tolerant of "toxic gamer cultures".

6 Toxic Gamers are Alienating Your Core Demographic

If the gaming industry wants to effectively capture the interest (and income) of the next generation of consumers, mitigating the effects of user-generated toxicity should be a key focus.

Moderation strategies, such as word lists, automated detection, and contract moderators are often at the forefront of conversations around decreasing toxicity in user-generated content. While moderation is an important tool in the mission to reduce toxicity, these efforts are typically reactive. That is, they happen after the toxic content has been generated, thus leaving players open to the psychological harm that comes with being subjected to toxic behaviors and content, and reinforcing community norms around toxicity. Even when content is blocked before it reaches another user, moderation efforts alone fail to offer new ways of connecting and communicating with others. As such, in isolation, moderation is an ineffective strategy to shift community norms that currently support and/or normalize toxic behavior from users.

In addition to expanding and refining moderation efforts, preventative and resiliency-building strategies must be implemented and expanded and include tools to support the growth of community resilience within gaming ecosystems. For us, a resilient gaming community is one that is able to identify and appropriately reject toxic behavior, recover from toxic



disruptions (including deliberate attacks, accidents, or other incidents) and withstand the normalization of toxic behavior within their communities. A strategy for building resilient communities should incorporate intentional game design elements and empowered community management teams within their moderation protocols. For example, designing environments to support or suppress particular in-game behaviors is a common and essential topic in game design, and we can see these community-supporting game systems clearly present in reward systems like the Valor system in League of Legends (Riot) and the Commendation system in Destiny 2 (Bungie). Resources on designing to support community resilience and pro-social player behavior have been developed by work groups such as Polaris and the Fair Play Alliance.



Community management plays a key role in developing gaming communities resilient to toxic player behavior. Community managers (CMs) are often the front line of defense when it comes to setting the tone and nature of a community. They are the ones who interact with the players on the ground. CMs are instrumental in setting social standards within the game, often prior to release, and associated communities and are the ones responsible for making sure these spaces are safe and respectful for players. Though moderation efforts can act as a filter to help pull toxic content out of the ecosystem of a community, without the fostering of pro-social behavior, the community may be less likely to build up healthy norms and establish the ability to fight off some levels of toxicity on their own. For example, when looking at toxicity on Minecraft servers, researchers found that community guidelines and standards were more

powerful predictors of community norms than moderation efforts alone (Kowert, Botelho, Newhouse, 2022). Community managers are a powerful tool to support thriving and diverse gaming communities, yet community management positions and teams are often underfunded, lack needed resources, and are brought in too late in the development pipeline. Increasing strategic and financial investment into community management teams is necessary to support resilient and profitable gaming communities.

Toxic gaming spaces have become normalized within gaming cultures. These behaviors not only negatively impact the mental health of communities, but also negatively impact companies' bottom line. Proactive moderation, including the development of resilient communities, will be key to keep new generations of gamers engaged. Gaming companies should start experimenting with new design elements, community management techniques, and other forms of proactive moderation if they want to maintain their position as the dominant form of media in the 21st century.

REFERENCES

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The conclusions drawn from the Nielsen data are those of the researcher(s) and do not reflect the views of Nielsen. Nielsen is not responsible for, had no role in, and was not involved in analyzing and preparing the results reported herein.

Nielsen collected this data through their Video Game Tracking (VGT) Service and provided it to Take That through its Data for Good program. If you'd like to learn more about VGT and how you can leverage it, please reach out to vgtinfo@nielsen.com.

APPENDIX

Table 1. Gender differences in responses

	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>Gender</i>
I have decided against spending money in a game because of how other players treated me in that game.	6.10	<.001	.32	Men
I have quit a session/match, or quit playing a game permanently, because I was subjected to harassment or hate within that gaming community.	4.11	<.001	.21	Men
I have avoided playing certain games because of the reputation of that game's community.	2.75	.003	.15	Men

Table 2. Differences in reporting based on age (7-17 vs. 18+).

	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>Age</i>
I have decided against spending money in a game because of how other players treated me in that game.	5.49	<.001	.24	7-17
I have quit a session/match, or quit playing a game permanently, because I was subjected to harassment or hate within that gaming community.	6.19*	<.001	.27	7-17
I have avoided playing certain games because of the reputation of that game's community.	4.40	<.001	.19	7-17

*Mann-Whitney U test used because of unequal variances.