

FEMALE GAMERS' EXPERIENCES IN THE VALORANT COMMUNITY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF TECHNOLOGY

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Abstract

This study explores the motives and meanings of female gamers in the women-only Valorant community, focusing on their experiences within the online gaming community. This phenomenon is relevant given the increasing participation of women in the male-dominated first-person shooter (FPS) game industry. Using Alfred Schutz's qualitative phenomenological approach and the Social Construction of Technology (SCoT) theory, this study aims to understand how female gamers' subjective experiences are shaped by social interactions and technological constructions within the community. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with purposively selected community members and then analyzed using thematic techniques. The results show that gaming motives encompass environmental influences and technological exploration, evolving into a need for entertainment, safe spaces, supportive social interactions, and self-actualization. Meanwhile, the meaning of the women-only community expands from its practical function as a place to play together to become a symbol of female empowerment and solidarity in a masculine digital space. These findings suggest that female gamer involvement is not only driven by recreational aspects but also related to identity formation, gender solidarity, and resistance to stereotypes. This research contributes to the study of the role of gender-based communities in creating an inclusive and equitable gaming ecosystem.

Keywords: *Phenomenology, Online Gaming Community, Social Construction of Technology, Female Gamers, Valorant*

INTRODUCTION

The competitive online gaming industry has experienced rapid growth over the past decade, not only in terms of technology and game design, but also in terms of player demographics. One significant trend is the increasing participation of women as active gamers, including in the first-person shooter (FPS) genre, which has traditionally been synonymous with male dominance. Valorant, a popular FPS game developed by Riot Games, boasts a large and competitive global community. However, the social dynamics within it often demonstrate gender inequality, particularly in the form of verbal harassment, negative stereotypes, and marginalization of female gamers. (Ann Thomas & Rv, 2024; Maharani et al., 2024).

Previous research has shown that gender-based toxicity in Valorant appears in various forms, ranging from sexist comments, trash talk, to exclusionary behavior that affects the comfort of playing. (Crothers et al., 2024) In-game communication channels such as voice chat and text chat, although designed to support team coordination, often become a medium for reproducing gender-based symbolic violence. (Glory et al., 2023) This has prompted some female gamers to change their playing strategies, such as avoiding direct communication, using anonymous identities, or forming exclusive communities as safe spaces. (Scidone et al., 2024; Woods, 2021).

One concrete example of this strategy is the creation of the Valorant Girls Community (Celo) on Discord. This community not only serves as a gathering place for female gamers who want to play together without pressure or intimidation, but also serves as a space for emotional support, knowledge exchange, and identity strengthening as female gamers. (Ruiz-Bravo & Roshan, 2022). Studies on third places in digital spaces confirm that platforms like Discord can serve as neutral and inclusive social interaction spaces, where individuals feel they have the freedom to express themselves outside of the work or home environment. (Kim et al., 2025). While research on women in gaming is growing, studies that combine phenomenological and Social Construction of Technology (SCoT) perspectives

FEMALE GAMERS' EXPERIENCES IN THE VALORANT COMMUNITY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF TECHNOLOGY

Jalesita Putri Pramitha et al

within the context of FPS communities are still rare. Researchers use a phenomenological approach, particularly from Alfred Schutz, to understand how subjective experiences are shaped through social interactions, and how players give meaning to their gaming activities and the communities they participate in. (Berger, 2020; Takakusa, 2025) On the other hand, SCoT theory provides a framework for interpreting how technologies such as the game Valorant acquire different meanings for different social groups (relevant social groups), through processes of negotiation, interpretive flexibility, and closure of meaning within a broader social context. (Bijker et al., 2012; Kordyaka et al., 2023).

By combining these two perspectives, this study aims to fill the gap in the literature by exploring the motives and meanings of female gamers in Celo. The primary focus is on how female gamers' interactions within the community influence the construction of meanings about games and technology, and how this community can serve as a means of resistance to the masculine norms that dominate the gaming space. (Ruotsalainen & Meriläinen, 2025) The findings of this study are expected to provide theoretical contributions to the development of gender and technology studies, while also providing practical recommendations for game developers, community managers, and policymakers to build a safer, more inclusive, and equal gaming ecosystem for all genders.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Alfred Schutz's phenomenology focuses on understanding the meanings individuals construct through everyday social interactions. The concept of *lebenswelt* explains that lived experiences are perceived based on existing knowledge frameworks, the results of past interactions, and future expectations. In digital spaces, phenomenology is used to unravel complex subjective experiences, including emotions, interpretations, and actions that emerge within virtual communities. (Berger, 2020) Schutz believes that every experience can be analyzed through three levels of meaning construction: direct experience, reflection, and critical awareness. In the context of the Valorant Girls Community (Celo), phenomenology helps understand how female gamers interpret their interactions, both supportive and discriminatory. Takakusa (2025) adding that in the digital era, mediated sociality allows the formation of social bonds even without direct face-to-face contact, making virtual communities a source of emotional support as well as a space for identity negotiation.

SCoT theory developed by Pinch & Bijker (1984) emphasizes that technology acquires meaning through social processes. The four main components of this theory include relevant social groups, interpretative flexibility, closure and stabilization, and wider context. In the gaming world, relevant social groups include game developers, male players, female players, communities, and gaming media. Interpretative flexibility is seen when different groups have different perceptions and ways of using a game. In the Celo community, female gamers construct different meanings about Valorant, making it not only a competitive medium but also a safe space for interaction. Kordyaka et al. (2023) shows that the process of closure in gaming communities occurs when new norms are widely accepted, such as the ethics of non-harassment communication. With SCoT, researchers can map how communities like Celo play a role in redefining the meaning of technology, which was originally formed within a masculine culture.

FPS games like Valorant are often rife with gender bias. Ann Thomas & Rv (2024) and Maharani et al. (2024) found that female gamers are often the targets of verbal harassment, sexist comments, and exclusionary behavior. Crothers et al. (2024) confirms that these types of toxic interactions impact female gamers' motivation to play, sense of safety, and self-confidence. Protective strategies include avoiding in-game communication, using anonymous accounts, and joining women-only communities. (Scidone et al., 2024). Ruotsalainen (2025) expands this discussion by examining how online forums shape the discourse of the "ideal gaming woman," which often harbors double standards. Understanding gender within gaming spaces is crucial to understanding why communities like Celo are not simply a social choice, but a necessity for survival in a masculine and competitive gaming space.

The Valorant Girls Community (Celo) is a concrete example of creating a gender-based safe space in the digital realm. Ruiz-Bravo & Roshan (2022) Discord offers features that allow for private interaction management, strict moderation, and the allocation of discussion spaces according to members' needs. This supports the creation of a third place. (Kim et al., 2025), a social space that facilitates relaxed and equal interaction, distinct from private (home) or formal public (work/school) spaces. Study (Kim et al., 2025) emphasized that Discord encourages the creation of a flexible, community-based social environment. In Indonesia, Putra Sudiana & Sari (2023) found that communities like Celo help women address discriminatory attitudes from male players in Valorant. Thus, the Valorant Girls Community is not only a safe space but also a platform for empowerment and strengthening the identities of female gamers.

Previous research related to women in the gaming space has been conducted from various perspectives. Ann Thomas & Rv (2024) and Maharani et al. (2024) mapping forms of gender-based toxicity in Valorant.

FEMALE GAMERS' EXPERIENCES IN THE VALORANT COMMUNITY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF TECHNOLOGY

Jalesita Putri Pramitha et al

Scidone(2024)reveals the self-protection strategies used by female gamers, including forming exclusive communities.(2025)discusses the construction of female gamer identities in online forums and the challenges of gatekeeping.Gisbert-Pérez et al. (2024)comparing gaming habits between male and female college students, found significant differences in motivation and perceived competence.Argaman et al. (2025)Through a systematic review, we identify factors of inclusion and exclusion in the gaming community, providing a conceptual framework for understanding how the Valorant Girls Community can create an inclusive and sustainable ecosystem.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative, phenomenological approach to explore the subjective experiences of female gamers in the Valorant Girls Community. Alfred Schutz's phenomenological approach was chosen because it allows us to examine meanings formed through direct experience, reflection, and critical awareness. Furthermore, the Social Construction of Technology (SCoT) framework is used to understand the reciprocal interactions between Valorant's gaming technology, relevant social groups, and the cultural contexts that influence them.

Seven informants were purposively selected, representing diverse ages, professions, and levels of gaming experience. Data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. Questions focused on two main aspects: motives for engaging in Valorant and the meaning of the online gaming community. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically.

Thematic analysis was conducted by integrating Schutz's phenomenological framework and the SCoT concept.The analysis process included open coding, grouping codes into subthemes, and developing main themes that represented the informants' experiences. Data validity was maintained through member checking and source triangulation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results and discussion section in this study is divided into two main sub-chapters, namelyThe first discussion concerns the motives of female gamers in joining and participating in the Valorant Girls Community (Celo), covering factors such as initial interest, social motivation, emotional needs, and the search for a safe space in the gaming space. The second discussion concerns the meaning of Celo, which includes the community's role in shaping identity, strengthening solidarity, and becoming a symbol of resistance to masculine gaming culture. This division aims to provide a systematic analysis flow so that the relationship between initial motives, participation experiences, and final meaning can be fully understood.

A. Motives of Female Gamers in the Valorant Community

Based on interviews with seven informants, it was found that female gamers' involvement in the Valorant Girls Community (Celo) is driven by diverse but interrelated motives, including environmental influences, the need for entertainment, the desire to build social relationships, and the drive for self-development. These four motives form a flow of experience that can be understood through the lens of Schutz's phenomenology and the Social Construction of Technology (SCoT) framework he developed.Pinch & Bijker (1984).

The informants' initial experiences showed that the decision to play Valorant often stemmed from environmental influences and curiosity about FPS game technology. Several informants shared that they started playing because of friends' invitations or became interested after seeing gaming content on YouTube and TikTok. Technical factors such as visual quality, character design, and unique agent skills also played a role in the appeal. One informant revealed, "At first, I just saw my friends playing, got curious, and then tried installing it. It turned out to be fun and different from other FPS games." (VR, interview, 2025). This phenomenon illustrates the direct experience in Schutz's phenomenology, where first impressions shape the initial understanding of an experience.(Takakusa, 2025). From the SCoT perspective, the decision to start playing is influenced by relevant social groups that shape initial perceptions about gaming technology.(Kordyaka et al., 2023).

Over time, the meaning of gaming for informants evolved into a form of entertainment and relaxation. Playing Valorant was seen as a way to reduce stress from work or study, even as a "time to maintain sanity." As informant PU expressed, "When I'm tired from work, playing Valorant is like refreshing. I don't always have to win, the important thing is to be happy." (PU, interview, 2025). At this stage, the experience shifts from simply trying to become a reflective activity that provides personal value, as Schutz explained in the reflection stage. From a SCoT perspective, this demonstrates interpretive flexibility, where technology originally designed as a competitive arena is reinterpreted as a medium for recreation and self-care.(Ann Thomas & Rv, 2024; Lopez-Fernandez et al., 2019).

However, these positive experiences are often overshadowed by the masculine dynamics of interactions in Valorant's public spaces. Many informants recounted encounters with sexist comments or verbal harassment from male players, particularly when using voice chat. This prompted them to seek safer and more supportive spaces. The Valorant Girls Community became an important platform for building social relationships based on mutual respect. One informant explained, "Here, you can chat freely, without fear of being judged. It feels like having a family in the game." (GW, interview, 2025). This finding aligns with research Maharani et al. (2024) and Woods (2021) which shows that women-only communities function as counter-spaces that can minimize the risk of harassment while also providing emotional support. In Schutz's framework, these interactions are part of the process of intersubjectivity, where meaning is constructed through shared understanding among members. (Berger, 2020).

Joining the Valorant Girls Community not only provides a sense of security but also opens up opportunities for members to develop gaming skills and build self-confidence. Many informants admitted that they were previously considered less competent simply because of their gender identity. However, at Celo, they receive training, support, and the opportunity to compete without stigma. Informant BS explained, "I used to be considered incompetent because I'm a girl. Here, I'm invited to practice together until I'm good." (BS, interview, 2025). This process illustrates the critical consciousness stage in Schutz's phenomenology, where players recognize their position within the social structure of gaming and actively change it. From a SCoT perspective, this reflects closure and stabilization, where the meaning of Valorant within the community stabilizes as a means of empowering women, rather than simply an arena for competition. (Kordyaka et al., 2023; Ruotsalainen & Meriläinen, 2025).

Taken together, these four motives form a progressive journey. Environmental influences are the starting point that drives participation. The need for entertainment ensures continued engagement. Social interaction strengthens community ties, and the drive for self-actualization ensures long-term participation. Argaman et al. (2025) emphasizes that the success of creating an inclusive environment within a gaming community is heavily influenced by the community's ability to adapt to the needs and aspirations of its members. In this regard, Celo successfully fulfills this role by combining technical, social, and emotional aspects in its members' gaming experience.

This situation suggests that the motive for joining the Valorant Girls Community cannot be viewed solely as a reaction to negative experiences in Valorant's public spaces. Rather, it reflects a collective awareness of the importance of creating spaces that allow female gamers to build their identities, strengthen their skills, and find ongoing social support. This finding also aligns with the concept of third place. Kim et al. (2025), which positions the community as an informal social space that facilitates relaxed interactions, a sense of belonging, and the exchange of experiences.

Thus, this discussion of motives demonstrates that women's involvement in the Valorant Girls Community is the result of a complex interaction between personal experiences, social structures, and technological constructions of meaning. Schutz's phenomenology helps explain the dynamics of the development of these meanings from early experiences to critical awareness, while SCoT explains how female gamers collectively negotiate the meaning of Valorant to be more inclusive. These findings strengthen the argument that communities like the Valorant Girls Community play a crucial role in changing the landscape of gaming culture, which has traditionally been dominated by masculine norms, while also contributing to the literature on gender and technology, which increasingly emphasizes the importance of digital safe spaces. (Ann Thomas & Rv, 2024; Ruiz-Bravo & Roshan, 2022; Scidone et al., 2024).

B. The Meaning of Female Gamers in the Valorant Girls Community

Based on thematic analysis, female gamers' interpretation of the Valorant Girls Community (Celo) is not limited to its practical function as a place to play together, but has evolved into a symbol of safe space, a means of identity formation, and an arena for empowerment. This process can be understood through the lens of Schutz's phenomenology, which emphasizes the development of meaning from direct experience to critical awareness, and the Social Construction of Technology (SCoT) framework, which explains the negotiation of technological meaning within a broader social context. (Berger, 2020; Pinch & Bijker, 1984).

In the early stages of engagement, the meaning of community is largely rooted in direct experience, which contrasts with the conditions of playing in Valorant's public space. Before joining Celo, many informants experienced situations that made them feel unsafe, such as verbal harassment, gatekeeping, or belittling their abilities. One informant revealed, "Before, at open mics, someone would always insult them, so I'd rather keep quiet. But in Celo, I'm really free to chat or ask for help." (DY, interview, 2025). This situation aligns with the findings. Maharani et al. (2024) and Ann Thomas & Rv (2024) Public spaces in FPS games tend to reproduce

FEMALE GAMERS' EXPERIENCES IN THE VALORANT COMMUNITY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF TECHNOLOGY

Jalesita Putri Pramitha et al

masculine norms that are unfriendly to women. Thus, the Valorant Girls Community has begun to be interpreted as an antithesis to the toxic gaming environment, as well as a safe space. (Ruiz-Bravo & Roshan, 2022).

The meaning of community has evolved to become more personal and emotional for many informants. The Valorant Girls Community is not just a playgroup, but a platform that provides a sense of belonging and ongoing social support. Informant GW, for example, described interactions within the community as a family-like relationship: "We often share our stories on the server, not just about the game, but also about skincare or other girly things." (GW, interview, 2025). This phenomenon demonstrates the community's function as a third place. (Kim et al., 2025), an informal social space outside of home and work that facilitates equal interaction. From SCoT's perspective, this is an example of interpretive flexibility, where Valorant's gaming technology and the Discord platform are reinterpreted as a medium for building solidarity, not just for competition.

The social support provided by community members also strengthens their identity as female gamers. Many informants admitted that before joining, they were reluctant to highlight their gender identity in the gaming public space for fear of being stereotyped or harassed. However, in Celso, this identity has become a source of collective strength. One informant explained, "Here, being a female gamer isn't a problem; it's even something to be proud of. We can support each other and show that we're competent." (BS, interview, 2025). This finding aligns with research Ruotsalainen & Meriläinen (2025) which shows that virtual communities can be an arena for forming a more positive and empowered collective identity for female gamers.

As engagement increases, the meaning of community also expands into an arena of empowerment. Several informants stated that through the Valorant Girls Community, they have had the opportunity to improve their gaming skills, participate in internal tournaments, and even become mentors to new members. This process reflects the critical consciousness stage in Schutz's phenomenology, where individuals not only become aware of existing social structures but also take an active role in changing them. (Takakusa, 2025). Within the SCoT framework, this can be understood as part of closure and stabilization, when the meaning of community as a safe and productive space becomes a norm that is agreed upon and maintained together. (Kordyaka et al., 2023). The Valorant Girls Community's concept of a safe space is also closely linked to strategies of resistance to masculine gaming culture. With its moderation system, anti-toxicity policy, and support among members, this community serves as a tangible form of counter-space. (Scidone et al., 2024; Woods, 2021) The existence of counter-spaces like these allows female gamers not only to survive in the challenging gaming world but also to thrive and actively contribute.

Interestingly, interpretations of Celso are not entirely uniform. Some informants see the community as a bridge to a more confident return to the gaming public sphere, while others see it as an ultimate goal, a space comfortable enough to no longer need to seek external recognition. This diversity demonstrates that the meaning of community is dynamic and influenced by individual experiences, as explained in SCoT through the concept of interpretive flexibility. The alignment of these findings with previous literature suggests that the Valorant Girls Community fulfills the three main functions identified by Argaman et al. (2025) as characteristics of an inclusive gaming community: (1) providing a safe environment from harassment, (2) facilitating ongoing social support, and (3) providing opportunities for self-development. Furthermore, in the Indonesian context, these findings strengthen the study Putra Sudiana & Sari (2023) who sees the importance of women-only communities as a response to negative stereotypes and low expectations of women's abilities in competitive games like Valorant.

Overall, female gamers' interpretations of the Valorant Girls Community form a collective narrative that begins with a need for security, develops into meaningful social relationships, and ultimately leads to self- and group empowerment. Schutz's phenomenology helps explain this process as a journey from lived experience to critical consciousness, while SCoT reveals how the meanings of technology and community are negotiated and stabilized within specific social contexts. Thus, the Valorant Girls Community is not simply a gaming community, but rather an arena for social transformation capable of transforming women's experiences in the gaming world from marginalized positions to active subjects shaping gaming culture itself.

CONCLUSION

This research reveals that female gamers' involvement in the Valorant Girls Community (Celso) is the result of a series of interconnected experiences, ranging from an initial interest in the game influenced by the environment, to a need for entertainment and stress relief, to a search for a safe and supportive social space. Celso has become a space that not only addresses these needs but also shapes collective identity and empowers its members. In the early stages, the decision to join was driven by curiosity about gaming technology and the impact of social interactions outside the community. Over time, these experiences developed into strong social relationships, where members found a sense of belonging, mutual support, and the confidence to demonstrate their abilities. Celso's meaning extends

FEMALE GAMERS' EXPERIENCES IN THE VALORANT COMMUNITY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF TECHNOLOGY

Jalesita Putri Pramitha et al

beyond its practical function as a place to play, expanding into a symbol of resistance to toxicity in the gaming public sphere and an arena for self-empowerment. Within it, female gamers can freely express themselves, develop their skills, and build lasting solidarity. Celo ultimately serves as proof that an inclusive digital community can transform women's gaming experiences from a vulnerable position to one of empowerment and active participation in shaping a more equitable gaming culture.

This research can serve as a foundation for further studies examining the dynamics of gender-based gaming communities across various platforms or game genres. The analytical model, which combines a phenomenological approach with the social construction of technology, can also be applied to similar studies exploring user experiences in digital contexts. Future researchers are encouraged to further explore the factors influencing the sustainability of inclusive communities and their impact on cultural change in digital spaces.

For game developers and online community managers, these findings underscore the importance of providing safe, discrimination-free, and diversity-supporting interaction spaces. Effective moderation features, anti-toxicity policies, and support for the formation of positive communities like the Valorant Girls Community can enhance the gaming experience and player awareness. For women-only communities, maintaining values of inclusivity and mutual support are key to ensuring the community's sustainability and relevance amidst the challenges of a gender-biased gaming culture.

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FEMALE GAMERS' EXPERIENCES IN THE VALORANT COMMUNITY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF TECHNOLOGY

Jalesita Putri Pramitha et al

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