

TOXICITY AND THE BOTTOM LINE:

The impact of hate and harassment on player retention and in-game purchases

A white paper by Take This.

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Data provided by:



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Player safety is of utmost importance for game makers. However, it is often a revenue based argument that is most influential for enacting meaningful policy change.
- To facilitate creating a stronger business case for prioritizing resources to address toxicity, we surveyed 2,408 players about their trust and safety expectations and experiences in gaming spaces as they relate to hate and harassment.
- We found that 3 out of 4 players believe it is important or extremely important to feel safe from hate and harassment in games, with younger players placing a greater emphasis on the importance of safety than older players.
- 1 in 10 players feel unsafe in gaming spaces, with younger players feeling more unsafe than older players.
- Members of marginalized communities (i.e., LGBTQIA+ and ethnic/racial minorities) feel the most unsafe.
- 1 in 5 players spend less money in gaming spaces due to hate and harassment.
- 3 out of 10 players leave during a match or before a match has started to avoid harassment.
- 4 out of 10 players turn off voice chat to avoid hate and harassment in gaming spaces.
- Safer communities are more profitable communities. No one wants to spend time in a place where they feel unsafe, and players are putting their money where their mouth is.

INTRODUCTION



RACHEL KOWERT, PH.D.
Research Director

Player safety continues to be at the forefront of discussions for game players and game makers alike. At the end of January, the World Economic Forum (2024) released a report discussing how trust and safety is at the core of growth for the industry at large. In this space, particular interest has been placed on younger players, with initiatives such as the Online Safety Act in the UK and Kids Online Safety Act in the US being introduced to increase the scope of protection for minors from online harms. Games provide a particularly unique space in these discussions as they have a primarily adult user base (ESA, 2022) and are typically not included in governmental discussions in the same way as social media, despite the fact games are social platforms where social interactions often form the center of the experience (Steinkuehler, 2023).



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Qualitative Researcher

While the mental health repercussions of toxic behavior in games is well documented (Kowert, Kilmer, & Newhouse, 2024), the way these behaviors translate into lost revenue for the games industry remains unclear. As an industry that is beholden to stakeholders, a revenue-based argument is critical to enacting meaningful policy change. Over the last year, Take This has been working to develop the foundation for a business case to quantify the cost of toxicity on players and studios. In 2023 we released our first report from this work, Toxic Gamers Are Alienating Your Core Demographic: The Business Case for Community Management (Kowert & Kilmer, 2023) demonstrating how the industry is losing revenue and directly through lost in-game purchases and reduced player engagement due to toxic gaming communities. In late 2023, Nielsen, through their Games for Good program, provided a second round of data collection to facilitate additional research to support the business case for prioritizing community management efforts.

Current Research

In total, 2,408 players were surveyed about their trust and safety expectations and experiences in gaming spaces as they relate to hate and harassment. The participants in this survey were recruited to reflect a representative sample of active gamers across age and gender. Other demographic information, such as sexual orientation, was also recorded. The key findings are discussed below.

3 out of 4 players believe it is important or extremely important to feel safe from hate and harassment in games. This pattern held across gender with most male (70%) and female (83%) players emphasizing the importance of feeling safe.

Younger players place greater emphasis on the importance of safety than older players. While safety was noted as important for all players, younger players placed greater emphasis on the importance of safety than older players. Children (aged 7 - 12) and adolescents (aged 13 - 17) placed a greater importance on safety than older age groups.

How important is it for you to feel safe from hate and harassment in gaming spaces (by age)?

	7-12	13-17	18-24	25-34	35-54
It is extremely important to me	51%	54%	39%	41%	41%
It's important to me	32%	29%	30%	31%	31%
It's somewhat important to me	11%	10%	18%	16%	16%
It matters a little bit, but not much	4%	3%	8%	6%	6%
It doesn't matter to me at all	2%	3%	6%	7%	6%



3 out of 4 players

think it is important or extremely important to **feel safe from hate and harassment** in games

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1 in 10 players report they feel somewhat or very unsafe in gaming spaces. Notably, this was consistent across gender with 10% of male and female players reporting gaming spaces are not places where they feel safe from hate and harassment.

Young adult players feel the most unsafe in gaming spaces. When examining across age, young adult players (aged 18 - 24) report feeling less safe in gaming spaces than older and younger age groups.

How important is it for you to feel safe from hate and harassment in gaming spaces (by age)?

	7-12	13-17	18-24	25-34	35-54
I feel very safe	49%	53%	34%	42%	48%
I feel fairly safe	43%	40%	47%	46%	45%
I feel somewhat unsafe	7%	6%	17%	11%	6%
I feel very unsafe	1%	1%	2%	2%	1%

Non-straight, non-white groups reported feeling more unsafe than straight, white groups. Examining the perceptions of safety across racial/ethnic groups and sexual orientation, non-white and non-straight groups report feeling less safe than white, straight groups. Across race and ethnicity, Asian (18%) and Black (16%) players feel the most unsafe. For members of the LGBTQ+ community, nearly a quarter (23%) of bisexual players reported feeling unsafe in gaming spaces.

1 in 5 players spend less time in gaming spaces due to hate and harassment. Players are not only disengaging from the gaming community due to hate and harassment but also disengaging from the game space itself. One-fifth of players report spending less time (21%) in a gaming community to avoid harassment from other players. Male players (22%) were more likely than female players (18%) to reduce time spent in a game due to hate and harassment. Across age groups, 18 - 24 year olds were the most likely to take action against toxic behavior by disengaging from the gaming community by spending less time within them.

Which of the following actions have you taken to avoid harassment from other players in an online game (by gender)?

	Total	Male	Female
Spent less time in a gaming community	21%	22%	18%
Spent less money in a gaming community	19%	22%	13%
Left a gaming lobby before the game or match had started	27%	26%	27%
Left a game or match after it started	31%	33%	27%
Turned off voice chat	44%	44%	45%

1 in 5 players spend less money in gaming spaces due to hate and harassment. Players are not only disengaging from the gaming community due to hate and harassment but also changing their spending habits. One-fifth of players report spending less money (19%) in a gaming community to avoid harassment from other players. Male players (22%) were more likely than female players (13%) to reduce money spent in a game due to hate and harassment. Across age groups, 18 - 24 year olds were the most likely to reduce their spending in response to hate and harassment.



The propensity to disengage in-game varied across racial groups, with Asian and White groups being the most likely to reduce spending, with Asian, Black, and White communities being the most likely to spend less time in gaming spaces to avoid hate and harassment from other players.

	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian
Spent less time in a gaming community	21%	22%	16%	31%
Spent less money in a gaming community	21%	15%	11%	25%

3 in 10 players leave a match after it has started to avoid harassment. A significant proportion of players reported disengaging with communities in which they are actively participating in to avoid harassment from other players in an online game. 3 out of 10 players also report leaving a match before it has started, while 4 in 10 turn off voice chat to avoid harassment. The need for these strategies not only negatively impact the harassed player's experience but the rest of the players in the match. This pattern largely holds across gender, age, and race/ethnicity.

Discussion

We found that for many players, safety is a priority. For most players their ideal expectation of safety is not being met, with a significant number of players feeling actively unsafe in gaming spaces.

Experiences were relatively consistent across gender, with both male and female players prioritizing safety and initiating harm mitigating strategies to avoid it, including reducing engagement in gaming communities (such as turning off voice chat) and reducing the amount of overall time and money spent in communities where they experience hate and harassment.

Supporting the findings in our initial report, young adults were the most likely to disengage or avoid gaming communities with toxic communities. It may be, at least partially, related to their perception of spaces to be more unsafe than players from other age groups, with young adult game players (aged 18 - 24) report feeling the most unsafe of all the age groups. Young adult groups may also have the most time to dedicate to game play making them more likely to reduce the amount of time and money when they feel unsafe or uncomfortable in a gaming space. This age group also tends to have the least amount of disposable income among adult groups (Statista, 2022); thus, they are likely to be more stringent in determining when and where to

spend it. It may also be that the newest generation of adult gamers is simply more advocacy driven or less tolerant of hate and harassment in their online spaces. Additional research is needed to understand the role of age. However, taking these results in combination with our first report examining the business case for community management (Kowert & Kilmer, 2023), it is clear that young adult players are the most likely to take individual action to protect themselves from hate and harassment in games.



Examining the perceptions of safety across racial/ethnic groups and sexual orientation, non-white and non-straight groups report feeling less safe than white, straight groups. These findings reiterate previous research that has found that hate and harassment in games is disproportionately targeted towards marginalized groups, including Black (Gray, 2012) and gay (Brenner-Levoy, 2023) players.

The propensity to disengage in-game varied across racial groups which likely reflects the different kinds of harms they are likely to encounter. For example, previous research looking at the experiences of Black players has found racism is a relatively common experience. If these players experience

racism in their gaming spaces they may be likely to switch communities altogether (i.e., spend less time in the community) rather than lowering their engagement through spending.

Interestingly, White players are just as likely to reduce time spent playing as they are money spent within a game itself, suggesting that for a significant proportion of players, they choose to completely disconnect from gaming spaces where hate and harassment are experienced.

It is notable that a quarter of players report leaving a game after it has started but only 10% of players report gaming spaces as actively unsafe. This suggests that part of the level of perceived safety in gaming spaces may be rooted in individual knowledge of mitigation or self-protection strategies. This supports other research in this space, which finds existing trust and safety approaches are insufficient in safeguarding players'

experiences in games. Additional investment is needed to iterate new approaches to trust and safety in games, such as developing more stringent and actionable community guidelines (Call of Duty Staff, 2024) or standardizing the integration of voice moderation (Kowert & Woodwell, 2022).

Concluding Thoughts

Safety is not just a priority from an ethical standpoint but from a monetary one as well. While many game makers care deeply about their communities, it can be difficult to enact structural change or institute new policies without demonstrating a business case. Our hope is that this work can help provide the foundation for that business case and move the needle of change for safer communities; which, in the end, are more profitable ones. No one wants to spend time in a place where they feel unsafe, and players are putting their money where their mouth is.

Safer communities are more profitable communities.

No one wants to spend time in a place where they feel unsafe, and players are acting with their wallets.

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Appendix

How important is it for you to feel safe from hate and harassment in gaming spaces

	Total	Male	Female
It is extremely important to me	44%	38%	55%
It's important to me	31%	32%	28%
It's somewhat important to me	14%	17%	11%
It matters a little bit, but not much	5%	7%	3%
It doesn't matter to me at all	5%	6%	3%

How safe from hate and harassment do you feel in online gaming spaces (by gender)?

	Total	Male	Female
I feel very safe	45%	49%	40%
I feel fairly safe	44%	41%	49%
I feel somewhat unsafe	9%	9%	10%
I feel very unsafe	1%	1%	1%

How important is it for you to feel safe from hate and harassment in gaming spaces (by race/ethnicity)?

	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian
I feel very safe	47%	44%	38%	21%
I feel fairly safe	44%	40%	52%	61%
I feel somewhat unsafe	8%	14%	7%	15%
I feel very unsafe	1%	2%	4%	3%

How important is it for you to feel safe from hate and harassment in gaming spaces (by sexual orientation)?

	Straight	Gay or Lesbian	Bisexual
I feel very safe	44%	39%	26%
I feel fairly safe	45%	47%	50%
I feel somewhat unsafe	10%	10%	20%
I feel very unsafe	1%	4%	3%

Which of the following actions have you taken to avoid harassment from other players in an online game (by gender)?

	Total	Male	Female
Spent less time in a gaming community	21%	22%	18%
Spent less money in a gaming community	19%	22%	13%
Left a gaming lobby before the game or match had started	27%	26%	27%
Left a game or match after it started	31%	33%	27%
Turned off voice chat	44%	44%	45%

Which of the following actions have you taken to avoid harassment from other players in an online game (by age)?

	7-12	13-17	18-24	25-34	35-54
Spent less time in a gaming community	20%	18%	27%	22%	17%
Spent less money in a gaming community	20%	17%	23%	17%	18%
Left a gaming lobby before the game or match had started	31%	29%	35%	22%	21%
Left a game or match after it started	34%	29%	37%	31%	25%
Turned off voice chat	44%	46%	50%	47%	37%

Which of the following actions have you taken to avoid harassment from other players in an online game (by race/ethnicity)?

	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian
Spent less time in a gaming community	21%	22%	16%	31%
Spent less money in a gaming community	21%	15%	11%	25%
Left a gaming lobby before the game or match had started	28%	24%	18%	27%
Left a game or match after it started	32%	26%	24%	31%
Turned off voice chat	44%	47%	42%	53%