



Cyberbullying and gender violence in online games

Cyberbullying e violência de gênero em jogos online

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to identify how female players perceives manifestation of violence/abuse on the online gaming environment. It is a cross-sectional descriptive study using qualitative research, with violence in the virtual environment as a variable. It started in July 2018 and it finished in November 2018. Data were acquired in two cities: Juazeiro do Norte and Crato (State of Ceará, Brazil). It was used a semi-structured interview which has been finished with saturation. All interviews were processed by the software IRAMUTEQ, v0.7 alpha 2. During the research process 13 (thirteen) female players participated, most of them are 20 to 35 years old, students and single. From the responses collected, it was possible to elaborate two different thematic categories: The first one addresses the types of violence suffered in online games, with emphasis on the psychological one, materialized in swearing and sexual harassment; and the second, the motivations of sexual violence in online games as a result, in part, of the presence of women in this environment. It was concluded that gender abuse happens in every single male dominant environment (such as online gaming). Thus, encouraging the reporting and the punishment of aggressions, and the inspection of these environments can democratize such spaces.

Keywords: Gender-based violence. Mental health. Online games.

RESUMO

A pesquisa teve como objetivo identificar a percepção de mulheres jogadoras *online* quanto às manifestações de violência no espaço virtual. Trata-se de estudo transversal, descritivo e qualitativo realizado entre julho e novembro de 2018 nos municípios de Juazeiro do Norte e Crato, Ceará, Brasil. Utilizaram-se roteiros semiestruturados para as entrevistas que foram processadas pelo *software* IRAMUTEQ, versão 0.7 alfa 2. Participaram 13 mulheres, entre 20 e 35 anos, solteiras e estudantes. A partir dos dados coletados, se elaboraram duas categorias temáticas. A primeira aborda os tipos de violência sofrida em jogos *online*, com destaque para a psicológica, materializada em xingamentos e assédio sexual; e a segunda, as motivações da violência sexual em jogos *online* como resultado, em parte, da presença de mulheres nesse ambiente. Concluiu-se que a violência de gênero está presente em todos os espaços onde as mulheres se inserem, incluindo os virtuais. Assim, incentivar a denúncia e punição de agressores e a fiscalização desses locais pode democratizar tais ambientes.

Palavras-chaves: Jogos *online*. Saúde mental. Violência de gênero.

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INTRODUCTION

Violence is now one of the leading causes of death and illness in the world and regarded as a major public health problem. The World Health Organization (WHO) characterizes it as the intentional use of physical strength or power, in real threat, against oneself or another person, group or community, which can result in psychological damage, injury, social deprivation, poor development or death.¹

This phenomenon has “multifaceted” characteristics, and there are several practices and expressions of violence present in urban and institutional spaces, in a subtle and veiled way, as in the cases of violence that mainly, but not exclusively, affect children, adolescents, the elderly, women and sexual minorities.²

Gender-based violence, according to 2011 data from the Network to Combat Violence against Women, from the Secretariat for Women’s Policies 2011,³ is one of the main forms of violation of women’s human rights, affecting them in their rights to life, health and physical integrity.

It is essential to understand that such violence is historically and culturally constructed. Differentiated education between boys and girls is a perpetuating factor, given that education for men is based on violence, authoritarianism, power and the suppression of emotions. Thus, since childhood, boys are encouraged to exercise a hegemonic masculinity, having as reference the sexist stereotypes that delegate to men the strong and aggressive role, which ends up naturalizing a culture of violence.⁴

Violence against women, according to article 5 of Law 11.340/2006, recognized as the Maria da Penha Law, can be manifested in physical, psychological, sexual, patrimonial and moral ways.⁵ It damages the victims’ physical and mental health, resulting in disabilities and, consequently, contributing to women’s low social status.⁶

Concerning mental health, it’s noteworthy that women victims of violence are statistically

more likely to present, at some point in their lives, common mental disorders, such as depressed mood and anxiety.⁷ These conditions are characterized by symptoms such as irritability, tension, worry, sadness and crying.⁸ It is added that psychological violence, even when not associated with physical violence or other types, is directly related to the occurrence of such disorders.⁷

That said, it is evident that violence against women can be manifested in several environments in which the female population is inserted - here we highlight those linked to technological resources, such as virtual environments accessed through the world wide web, the internet. Currently, spaces such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, online gaming platforms and others can become places of violence against them,⁹ a situation that requires confrontation and punishment.

In this sense, in order to face violence in this space, Law No. 13,185/2015, which established in its article 1 the Program to Combat Systematic Intimidation (Bullying), classifies in Article 3 the types of violence that can be punished, characterizing in the item VIII the virtual one as: depreciation, by sending messages that divulge the victims’ intimacy; adulteration and sending of images and personal data that promote suffering or aim to create means of psychological and social embarrassment.¹⁰

Aimed exclusively to curb this type of violence against women, Law No. 13,642/2018 - Lei Lola - recently approved, attributes to the Federal Police the investigation of crimes committed through the internet that disseminate misogynistic content.¹¹

Among the crimes liable to investigation and punishment in the virtual environment, the so-called cyberbullying⁹ stands out, which refers to the use of communication technologies to debase, humiliate, threaten or even do any malicious action to others, reflecting negatively on the mental balance of the victims, violating their rights as citizens.¹² People who engage in this type of practice may respond, according to the Brazilian Penal Code, for crimes of

slander (art. 138), insult (art. 139), defamation (art. 140), illegal constraint (art. 146) and others, and be penalized with imprisonment from three months to three years, in addition to paying fines and/or carrying out voluntary work.¹³

Cyberbullying can be manifested in online gaming and media platforms, in which real-life sexual violence invades networks through the objectification of women. Thus, seeing the female sex as an object for male use becomes constant, as well as harassment and sexual violence in real life.¹⁴ In the vast majority of cases, the image of female characters is sexualized through the use of few clothes and the exploration of the character's body in its curvatures, volumes and proportion.¹⁵

Still, questions about their ability to enter and remain in this typically male environment materialize. In fact, the gaming space turns into something hostile to the female gender, and women are constantly questioned about being in digital games accessed virtually¹⁶, such as Fortnite, Freefire and Roblox, among others.

The justification for such a posture may be linked to the fact that these games are created, mostly, by men, who end up reproducing in the characters the experience of the world they carry, that is, a macho environment where women always occupy secondary and less prominent positions¹⁷ and delegated to female characters, fragile personas, like princesses to be saved. Therefore, the idea of men as subjects of the narratives is strengthened, and women, as objects, reducing them to the prize/treasure/objective of the game.¹⁵

Despite these conditions, women see games as a leisure alternative, which is why they choose to play. However, this has become a source of suffering, since they have reported aggression in this space, not only because of sexualization, but because they are women, who, when entering this universe, end up having their performance questioned by the male audience.⁹ This aspect reinforces the need for gender inequalities to also be discussed in the digital field,

with regard to product development indeed, so that, in the future, young women can be in an environment with more equality and access opportunities.¹⁷

Although it is evident, violence against women in online games is a topic that is little publicized and discussed, so it is necessary to carry out studies with a view to identifying violence that occurs in this environment, unveiling and presenting information about virtual victimization. Thus, this article aimed to identify the perception of female players regarding the manifestations of violence in this virtual space.

METHODOLOGY

This is a cross-sectional, descriptive study with a qualitative approach, which aimed to investigate the existing violence against women who consume virtual games. It was held from July to November 2018 in the municipalities of Juazeiro do Norte and Crato, located in the State of Ceará, Brazil.

The participants are women online players, who have suffered or suffer violence in this environment. Thus, to develop the research, the following inclusion criteria were established: i) women over the age of 18, since, according to the Child and Adolescent Statute (Law No. 8,069/1990), they are fully responsible for their actions; and ii) women who use online gaming platforms with a chat option, who reported having been victims of violence in games. Those who routinely adopted male identification in games were excluded from the work, since they presented themselves as men. In all, 13 players were selected for the interviews.

The first respondent was identified through the social network Instagram as a key informant. After contacting her through Instagram direct (messaging service where the user can share photos and videos privately with groups and friends on the social network), she gave the researcher her phone number so that a better dialogue about scheduling the testimony was possible.

After clarification and awareness of the research objectives, there was a positive signal to take part of it. Thus, the Free and Informed Consent Form (ICF) was presented for signature and this informant was asked for telephone contacts of other online players (maximum of three) to recruit study participants using the “snowball sampling” technique or, still, the also known “chain referral sampling”.¹⁵

In telephone conversations with potential participants, the researcher clarified the objectives of the study, the inclusion and exclusion criteria and the methodological steps. For those who fit the established parameters, the invitation was made, as well as the scheduling, and a location for data collection was also defined, according to each one’s availability. The testimonies took place on working days and during business hours; the majority (seven) took place in easily accessible public places, three took place in colleges, and three, in the researcher’s residence. It should be noted that privacy was guaranteed for those that were conducted in a public environment so that there was not anybody else in the place.

Each participant was asked to provide three more contacts of other players who would compose the group of respondents in the study. It should be noted that the end of the collection occurred due to the theoretical saturation of the data obtained. For this, the collection was carried out with the analysis of what was raised, with a view to identifying at what point this occurred. Such a situation happens when the researcher considers discarding recently collected data, as they do not add more to the study design.¹⁹

This study adopted the interview through a semi-structured script with 24 questions as a data collection technique, in order to identify the profile of the participants, experiences of victimization and types of violence suffered in virtual game platforms, as well as the motivations for his to happen. In addition, it sought to investigate what drove them to use this form of entertainment, their knowledge of the legislation pertaining to cybercrimes and whether they had reported this violence to the competent authorities at any time. All interviews - each lasted for

about 30 minutes - were recorded on digital media after authorization by the research participants and later transcribed.

In order to maintain confidentiality, the informants’ identification was given by the fantasy names of female characters in games, chosen by themselves. To validate the data collection tool, a pre-test was carried out with two online players contacted from a group of social networks who lived in another municipality.

Initially, the speeches were transcribed and organized according to the content analysis of the thematic categorical type, which proposes to verify the nuclei of meaning that make up the analyzed speeches and whose presence or frequency has some meaning for the analytical objective sought, instead of making statistical inferences. Thematic categorical analysis works in stages that seek to break the text into units and into categories for later regrouping, establishing itself in two moments: the inventory, in which the elements are sought to be isolated; and the classification or organization of messages based on shared elements.²⁰ The elaborated categories were discussed in the light of the relevant literature.

Then, as a way to further corroborate and substantiate the results obtained by the categorical analysis, the interviews were organized in the Libre Office Writer program, version 5.3. There the material was prepared by means of in-depth readings, corrections and decoding of the fixed variable, as can be mentioned: * ENT_01 to * ENT_13.

The responses were then processed by the software *Interface de R Pour L Analyses Multidimensionnelles de Textes L de Questionnaires* (IRAMUTEQ), version 0.7 alpha 2.²⁰ This software, which is free to install, allows statistical analysis on textual corpus and individual/word tables. The analysis of the textual corpus refers to the examination of a set of texts, such as the transcripts of the 13 interviews conducted. IRAMUTEQ offers the possibility of different forms of textual analysis, from simple to multivariate (descending hierarchical classification and post-factorial analysis).²⁰ For this

study, only one form was used, similarity analysis, which makes it possible to identify co-occurrences between words, and its result brings indications of the connection between them, helping to identify the structure of a textual corpus.^{21,22} The result was presented in the form of a figure and analyzed in a reflective and descriptive manner.

Thus, both the organization in categories and the similarity analysis showed in this study the occurrence of violence in cyberspace and its motivations, as well as the expressions of violence perceived by online female players.

In view of the ethical and legal aspects of this research, it was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Regional University of Cariri (CEP/URCA), under No. 2,821,626.

RESULTS

Thirteen women who practiced some modality of virtual games, which had space for online interaction (virtual chat) participated in this study. The results show that most of them had heterosexual sexual orientation (n = 09), students (n = 10), aged between 18 and 33 years (n = 13), mostly white and brown (n = 12), single (n = 13), without children (n = 13), agnostic (n = 06), without income (n = 06) and lived with their parents (n = 10). All of them reported that they had already suffered violence in online games - the majority (n = 10) played Rolling Play Games (RPG), one of them, League of Legends, another one, Dota, and one, World of Warcraft, when this occurred.

Based on the speeches of the interviewees, it was possible to elaborate two thematic categories when considering the report of suffered violence. For that, the content of the speeches was analyzed and the times when the content of each message appeared, giving rise to such categories and subcategories. Thus, the first category, which addresses the types of violence suffered, was mentioned 28 times in the

speeches, of which 20 were psychological, and eight, sexual/harassment. The second, which deals with the motivations of violence in online games, was cited 27 times.

Category 1: Typology of violence in online games

This category addresses the typology of violence suffered by informants in the online gaming environment, since these experiences of victimization can directly interfere in their lives - both in psychological and physical health. In the first subcategory, the reality of psychological violence is discussed, and in the second, sexual violence and harassment experienced in this space.

Subcategory 1.1: Psychological violence

In this subcategory, the presence of psychological violence was identified in the players' speeches, as explained below.

"Well, they often swear, when they say 'women only serve as a support', 'women always play badly', 'women can't play', 'I don't know what women do in games', such as, 'go do the dishes'". (Sindel)

"... I've already been AFK (away from keyboard), I didn't do anything in the game because the boy said 'you see? This is because she's a woman, if she were doing the dishes it would be better', then I was AFK". (SonyaBlade)

"... but when they find out that I or any of the other women on the team are women, the insults are specifically directed to us". (Riven)

Subcategory 1.2: Sexual/harassment violence

In this subcategory, in addition to verbal/psychological violence, the players experience sexual harassment/violence, as reported below.

"[...] it has happened to me that a guy kept sending me messages, flirting with me because I'm a woman; I got tired of spending hours on *mute* online games (a slang that means avoiding the player to chat with other players through audio), only typing, because I didn't want to talk as I already knew how inconvenient that would be". (SonyaBlade)

"[...] because I was playing with other three guys, and all the time they would flirt with me, or would court me, in a boring way". (Chun-Li)

"[...] like those old jokes, you know, such as 'show your tits', etc."(Zelda)

Category 2: Motivations for the occurrence of violence in online games

In this category, the motivations and justifications for the occurrence of violence in online games are exposed from the perspective of the informants.

As in social relationships, in the virtual environment the motivations for the practice of violence in games are often associated with prejudice in relation to the players' gender identity.

"[...] The fact that people find it fun, 'oh, it's fun to make fun of a girl', men feel more powerful when they do that, they feel more, the best players". (Sindel)

"Violence in relation to women, I think it has been characterized by machismo, the culture of machismo, and the fact that the game is a platform predominantly used by men; when there is a woman there, it kind of gives them the right to underestimate this minority". (Chun-Li)

"It is very common for the male sex to occupy this space of games, so when he sees a woman playing, he already diminishes the woman, saying that she does not know how to play, that she is not in her environment, it is not their place, these things". (Ash)

Similarity analysis

In order to reinforce the findings obtained, the similarity analysis allowed to identify results similar to those displayed in the categories presented above, as shown in Figure 1.

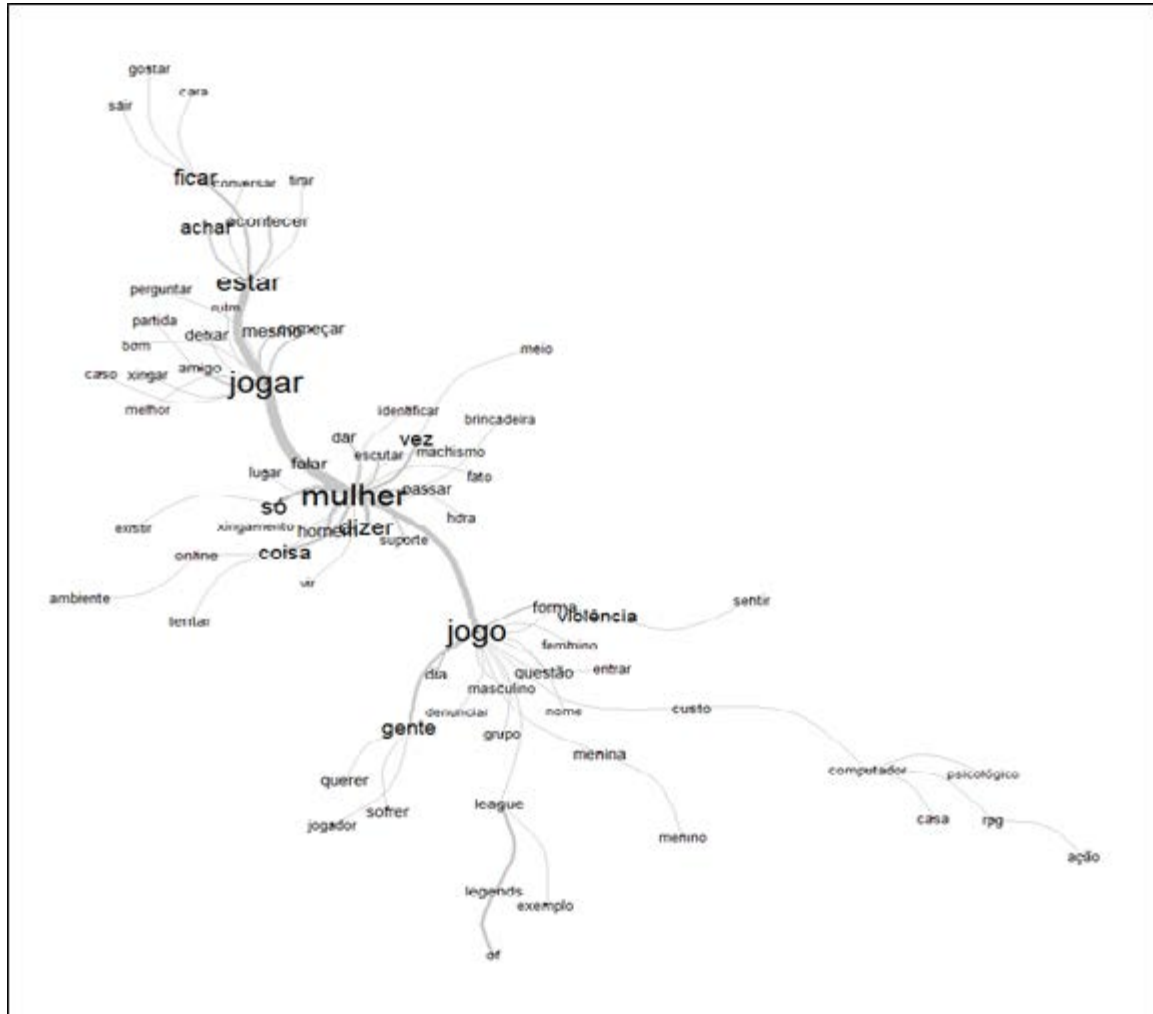


Figure 1. Similarity analysis of gender violence suffered in a virtual environment. Juazeiro do Norte and Crato, Ceará, 2018.
Source: Research data.

DISCUSSION

It is evident in the reports how gender violence in the online environment is naturalized routinely from the stereotypes reinforced by the aggressors when attributing the role of women and circumscribing it to the private space, emphasizing household chores as exclusively female activities. It was also observed the presence of insults made by them that reinforce psychological violence when questioning the players' capacity, causing embarrassment and stress. The discomfort they feel at the moment they mention ceasing their movements in the games after suffering some violence becomes explicit.

A study carried out through virtual interviews with 15 online players found a high presence of

gender stereotypes in virtual games: 94.15% of the participants claimed that, when playing, behaviors characterized as female ones were imposed, such as assisting players and occupying less prominent positions.²⁴

In a study carried out in São Paulo from May to July 2012, using a questionnaire on the internet, with a sample of 120 players, it was revealed that 43% of the interviewees stated that mistakes made in games are often associated with their genre and no equal treatment is given to the participants.²⁵

Other authors²³, in a literature review, claim that the construction of gender stereotypes occurs due to differences in power and class relationships. It is observed that in virtual environments the female gender has been presented as an accessory

whose main function is to provide assistance to male characters, serving as support.²⁶

Thus, by placing women taking on a secondary role in the development of the game, the virtual platforms end up reinforcing gender stereotypes in these environments and imposing a socially inferior function on the online players, leading them to be questioned when they occupy primary roles, in which they are protagonists.²⁶ This becomes clear when it becomes evident that, in the 1980s, female representations were reduced to “princesses to be saved” or to an “award” when the male character finished the games.¹⁷

Reports of sexual violence and harassment suffered by the informants reveal that in the online gaming scene objectification of the female body persists, through inconvenient flirtations and requests for them to expose parts of it, especially those linked to sexual attributes, such as the breasts. Thus, many times the player ends up muting the game in an attempt to avoid embarrassing situations, but even so, she continues to be constantly harassed through inappropriate words and courting.

This context commonly experienced by the informants seems to be related to the hypersexualization attributed to the image of female characters in games. Most of the time, the presence of bulging (and impressively upturned) breasts and absurdly small waists are characteristics purposely reinforced in order to nourish sexual fantasies.

Concerning this, a study that investigated the female representations in fighting games found that the analysis of these characters denotes a tendency to value their sexual attributes, especially through the costumes, which are filled with large breasts and hips, in addition to a standardization of the bodies, looking for a thin representation and large breasts.²⁷ Another work developed in 2009 had already pointed out that 83% of digital game characters have thin bodies.²⁸

Thus, the hypersexualization and sensuality of women in games are shown in an appealing way, out of context, and create a pattern of unique beauty and power, excluding other types. Such a pattern

stands out to the point of hiding characteristics of the personality and the ability of the characters, reinforcing that the objectification of women in this context constitutes a strategy to please the male target audience.²⁹

This virtual objectification materializes in the real field when the informants are victims of sexual harassment in matches - in addition to the symbolic violence represented by hypersexualized female patterns present there. Menti and Araújo⁹ claim that cases of sexual abuse against online players had already been documented during professional competitions, reinforcing the macho culture that is remarkable in games.⁹

In the interviewees' speeches, the motivations for the occurrence of violence in online games are related to the number of women in this space and the fact that this is primarily attributed to the male gender, since the macho society makes it understand that “women do not play”, therefore “game is not a woman's place”, strengthening the feeling of superiority of men in relation to women in the virtual environment. Thus, the players believe that the gender violence present there is linked to the culture of machismo, as they are often questioned, through stereotyped curses, as to the place in which they are inserted.

For a long time, it was believed that the biological characteristics of women reinforced the existence of less ability for games and motor coordination. In addition, social reasons linked to gender differences are also taken into account, since, socially constructed, they strengthen the definition of being a man or a woman; in the virtual world, electronic games are seen as male toys, and women should not be seen as masculinized when occupying this space.³⁰

Nowadays, virtual games are largely dominated by women, unlike what participant Chun-Li believes when reporting that they are a minority. In 2016, research ‘Pesquisa Game Brasil’, which aimed to outline the profile of Brazilian gamers, pointed out for the first time that the female audience

constitutes the largest consumer of electronic games in the country.³⁰ In this way, they gradually empower themselves, causing concerns in the male audience, formerly holder of that environment.

Thus, it is believed that the main motivations for the occurrence of gender violence in online games are associated with the support of stereotypes socially imposed on men and women, in which the woman must be delicate, sweet, feminine and submissive, whereas the man must be superior, strong and intellectual.⁷ This representation is still present in female characters, seen as submissive to men; he is the hero, since she has little narrative development, being forgotten in much of the story, fulfilling only what is imposed on the female gender in social construction, that is, caring and helping in the development of something.³¹ Often, she is just the motivation for male immersion in the games, giving the sense and the need for action within them with the famous formula "save the princess".

It is also understood that another significant reason for the occurrence of violence in games is the lack of effective punitive actions to face it. As the aggressor understands that he will not be punished, the feeling of superiority in the game is reinforced and collaborates so that the player continues to act violently in relation to the female online players.

However, despite the difficulties in identifying and punishing aggressors in virtual environments, Brazil has advanced in tackling this type of violence. Sanctioned in April 2018, Law No. 13,642 (Lei Lola) attributes to the Federal Police the investigation of cybercrimes of misogyny, materialized in the forms of sexual discrimination, hostility, aversion, jokes, depreciation, violence and sexual objectification.¹¹

Even so, few women recognize themselves as victims of violence in virtual spaces, which impacts the low rates of denunciation in the Women's Defense Stations. This fact reinforces the need for greater disclosure of this legal apparatus among the female public, in order to ensure that their rights are respected in all spaces, including virtual ones.

Corroborating the findings, in the similarity analysis it is revealed that the word "woman" appears as the main axis of the tree, which branches in several parts; however, two of these are more significant. It is important to highlight that some words that surround "woman" are loaded with prejudices, such as "man", "machismo" and "place" - the latter referring to the virtual environment as a place not suitable for women. From them there are others, which demonstrate that the association of being an inappropriate woman-place materializes in violence through pejorative expressions such as "insults", reinforcing the discriminatory discourses directed at the players in order to characterize the games environment as masculine and in which they cannot be protagonists, but play a secondary supporting role.

An important branch reveals the word "game", referring to the context of women in this environment, and the word "want" reinforces the relevance attributed by these game players as desired and leisure spaces. However, as a consequence of the female presence there, the term "suffer" is observed, indicating that it is a space of suffering due to victimization.

Also referring to the branching of the word "game", the term "denunciation" appears, among others, as a strategy to face the problem. However, it is important to note that their appearance did not show greater weight when compared to other words in the similarity analysis - perhaps due to the difficulty of women in accessing effective reporting channels, which may reveal their low credibility.

Finally, from the word "play", others branch out showing the dynamics of the act, involving the importance of "being" in this environment, although permanence is conditioned to a support network such as "friends", as well as the maintenance of dialogues necessary to guarantee their presence in the games as in "talking", as a possible strategy to avoid and/or minimize the effect of victimization.

CONCLUSION

In this study, it was possible to investigate the perception of online players regarding the occurrence, typology and motivations of gender violence in virtual games. This problem is becoming more and more frequent in the lives of these women and can cause psychological and social impacts.

The types of violence present in the online gaming environment were also identified, with emphasis on psychological and sexual harassment. The spread of psychological violence is directly linked to gender stereotypes, based on curses. The sexual/harassment occurred with the persistence of objectifying the female body in games, causing embarrassment to the players.

Given the above, it is noted that it is necessary to rethink the implications that this theme brings to the health of women victims of violence in online games, since the subject is not frequently addressed during professional training nor is it usually discussed with the female population.

Furthermore, this fact demonstrates that it is necessary to promote actions that enable greater access by society, especially women victims of this type of violence, to the existing legal apparatus, with a view to curbing such practices. The deeper knowledge of the current legislation, as well as the encouragement to denounce such practices, could contribute to a greater punishment of the aggressors. It is known that the absence of penalties for this type of violence favors its dissemination, as it reinforces the feeling of impunity and superiority that men have in relation to women also in the virtual environment.

Although it is important, this work presented limitations, such as the sample size, due to the difficulty in identifying women who play for leisure; this may be related to a social construct that this space is predominantly male. Despite this, the study may contribute to the safety equipment identifying solutions aimed at investigating gender violence within the online gaming environment and providing

for more effective punishments compared to those adopted by the gaming platforms.

The research can also collaborate with the areas of education and health to identify the psychological impacts on women victims of gender violence in virtual environments; these data will guide the elaboration of public policies with the purpose of supporting and protecting these women. It is suggested to carry out new research related to the theme, in order to expand its recognition and confrontation.

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