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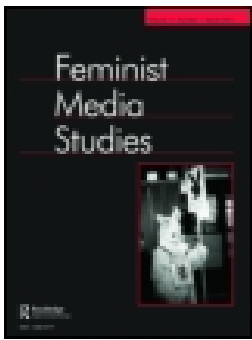
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# The stigma of feminism: disclosures and silences regarding female disadvantage in the video game industry in US and Finnish media stories

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines how the issue of gender, particularly women's (under)representation in the video game industry, is framed in US and Finnish media. Building on the notion of stigma surrounding feminism, the article examines discourse practices as acts of managing the image of feminism. The findings illustrate five stigma management strategies that offer the possibility of maintaining socially accepted ways of discussing gender inequality and portraying women in mainstream media. Using critical discourse analysis, the paper addresses how the use of these stigma management strategies connects with different contemporary feminisms. The strategies used and their ideological backgrounds vary between the two cultural contexts. This article contributes to the understanding of the ongoing discussions between postfeminism and neoliberal feminism in contemporary society and organizations by demonstrating how the expression of feminist ideas is managed in different cultural contexts.

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## Introduction

Despite a diminishing gender gap in worldwide player demographics, the global video game industry remains male-dominated. Women represent 21% of the global industry workforce (Johanna Weststar, Victoria O'Meara, and Marie-Josée Legault 2018<sup>2018</sup>), and they typically occupy administrative, rather than game development or executive roles (International Game Developers Association 2005). The masculinity of video game culture (e.g., Julie Prescott and Jan Bogg 2014) is also cultivated in game studios, constituting an unwelcoming or even misogynistic work culture and gendered positions for most women (Sarah Banet-Weiser and Kate M. Miltner 2016; Robin Johnson 2014; Alexander Styhre, Björn Remneland-Wikhamn, Anna-Maria Szczepeńska, and Jan Ljungberg 2018). The video game industry represents a large and constantly growing subset of the entertainment industry, and the gender imbalance and masculine culture of video games have repeatedly appeared in media headlines.

In this paper, we examine how women's representation occurs in US and Finnish media stories concerning the video game industry. We conducted a cross-cultural comparison, as we noticed differences during our initial browsing of media coverage: namely, the US

stories featuring women were abundant, and the gender gap in the industry was frequently discussed, whereas Finnish media rarely made explicit mention of gender, and stories featuring women sidelined the gender issue. US articles typically recount women's advances in the video game industry in a celebratory manner, such as this headline in *Bloomberg Tech*: "Microsoft's Ross Breaks Mold in Male-Dominated Video Games" (Sonali Basak and Dina Bass 2014). In Finland, the appointment of a woman as the CEO of the Finnish game development and entertainment company, Rovio Entertainment Corp., was reported by a major Finnish business magazine without reference to her gender: "Rovio appoints new CEO: 'No policy differences.'" (Talouselämä 2015, original in Finnish). Considering that Rovio is a well-known company, one might expect the media to make headlines about a woman's entry into a significant position. Given that women represent only roughly one-fifth of the workforce in both countries (KooPee Hiltunen, Suvi Latva and J-P. Kaleva 2019; Johanna Weststar, Eva Kwan and Shruti Kumar 2019), we were somewhat surprised by the difference in treatment of the gender issue.

We analyze the discourse practices within the frame of stigma management (Erving Goffman 1963), which offers a conceptual tool to examine how feminist ideas and positions are advocated and repudiated. The contemporary feminist landscape is shaped by contradiction. The stigma surrounding feminism (i.e., negative labeling of the feminist movement and the disavowal of feminist self-labeling; Myra Marx Ferree 2004) is evinced in young women's reluctance toward feminism (Christina Scharff 2012) and postfeminist parlances of gender inequality as past (Rosalind Gill, Elisabeth, K. Kelan and Christina, M. Scharff 2017) and in the individualization of feminism in neoliberal discourses. On the other hand, scholars perceive a surge in the popularity of feminism (Sarah Banet-Weiser 2018; Catherine Rottenberg 2014). However, Rottenberg (2014) has noted how feminism entangles with neoliberal discourses in ways that promote a highly individualized form of feminism.

Within the stigma management framework, we aim to situate cross-cultural media discourses within the contexts of postfeminism and neoliberal feminism. Drawing on critically oriented discourse analysis (Norman Fairclough 1992), we examine how the willingness to speak about gender issues and ways of representing women in the industry are shaped by employing different types of stigma management strategies embedded in contemporary feminist discourses. We focus on reporters' framing of gender inequality and their portrayal of women in games, as well as industry employees' discourse. Building on Goffman, we distinguish five discursive stigma management strategies through which the possibly negative connotations attached to the label of feminism and the espousing of feminist values are managed. We highlight how media discourses have the power to shape and even mute the way gender is discussed in specific cultural contexts. Comprehending cultural specificities in espousing and silencing gender issues allows for accentuating how contemporary feminist discourses are consequential in sustaining gender orders in male-dominated settings, such as the video game industry.

## Context

The video game industry constitutes one of the largest and fastest-growing subsets of the global entertainment industry. There are 2.5 billion gamers worldwide, and it is estimated

that they spent 152.1 USD billion on games in 2019 (Newzoo 2019). Video game revenue in the US is expected to grow at a 6.3% CAGR (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2017), and in 2018, the US video game industry reached record revenues of 43.4 USD billion (The Entertainment Software Association 2019b). In Finland, the video game industry is a 2 USD billion business, and Finland belongs to the top three game developer countries in Europe by turnover (Hiltunen, Latva and Kaleva 2019). The Entertainment Software Association (2019a) estimated that 46% of American gamers were female. The Finnish Player Barometer 2018 (Jani Kinnunen, Pekka Lilja and Frans Mäyrä 2018) does not show exact statistics but concluded that men played more digital games and there were more active digital game players among men.

Women represent roughly one-fifth of the global industry workforce (Statista 2020), and the gender composition of the US and Finnish video game industries is similar. The 2019 Developer Satisfaction Survey provides some demographic data regarding the US video game industry: 24% of responding game developers identified as women, with 49% of all respondents working in the US (Weststar, Kwan and Kumar 2019). In Finland, female employees constituted 20% of the industry workforce in 2018 (Hiltunen, Latva and Kaleva 2019), and the ratio of women to men working in software development was only 1:10 in the entire software sector (Finnish Software Industry & Entrepreneurs Association 2017). Overall, the amount of women in managerial positions across different industries are similar: Women held 20.2% of board seats in 2016 among Fortune 500 companies (Deloitte and Alliance for Board Diversity 2017), and one out of four top managers in Finnish companies was a woman in 2015 (Grant Thornton 2015).

Despite the statistical similarities in gender equality, the support mechanisms that explain women's labor force participation and their views of feminism are rather different in the US and Finland. The Finnish welfare state is built on state feminism, where women's movements closely ally and cooperate with the state or gender equality authorities to implement policies that support women's participation in the workforce (Helene Ahl, Karin Berglund, Katarina Pettersson, and Malin Tillmar 2016). For example, in Finland, the state offers paid parental leave and subsidized daycare. By contrast, the US does not offer statutory paid maternity leave. Hanna Ylöstalo (2019) suggests that even though Finns hold gender equality as an important value, there is a temptation to lull into the equality already achieved rhetoric, which may explain the resistance of, and even irritation with, gender equality activities in practice. In the US, feminism has been established through a movement that is organized outside the state (Ahl et al. 2016), and the US has stronger roots in organizing feminism around mass movements. Even though the US has also seen the rise of postfeminist culture, which renders gender inequalities in the past and perceives feminism as somewhat redundant (Kaitlynn Mendes 2011b), feminist scholars such as Rottenberg (2014) and Banet-Weiser (2018) have spoken of the surge in the visibility of feminism and the increasing interest of women to espouse feminism in the US. Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad (2017) also suggest that the current manifestations of postfeminism have moved toward a certain type of celebratory tone, rather than repudiation altogether.

## Stigma of feminism in contemporary feminist climate(s)

### *Postfeminism and neoliberal feminism*

Susan Faludi (1991) introduced the idea of backlash to capture the long-lasting assault and anger against feminism spread in the aftermath of second-wave feminism. As a consequence of the backlash, Marx Ferree (2004, 92) proposed that the declining number of individuals who report being “feminists” (e.g., in national surveys) can be explained by stigmatization. Indeed, stigma—an undesired, “discrediting,” quality (Goffman 1963, 3)—may prevent people from identifying with associated movements and groups (Marx Ferree 2004, 92). In recent decades, it has been suggested that feminism carries a negative label, particularly among young women (Angela McRobbie 2009; Scharff 2012). In this paper, we examine the stigma effect of feminism in the context of postfeminism and neoliberal feminism.

Postfeminism offers alternative lenses to gender inequality at a time when feminism revokes negative attitudes (Carisa R. Showden 2009). Postfeminism typically rests on the notions of framing gender inequalities as a bygone era, constructing gender inequalities as happening elsewhere, suggesting the acceptance of the status quo, and presenting women as the advantaged sex (Gill et al. 2017), making feminism seem antiquated and no longer appropriate for making sense of women’s experiences (Showden 2009). Maria Adamson (2017, 321) demonstrates in her analysis of female celebrity CEO autobiographies that women need to balance their feminist attitudes and views in a “nice” way “as opposed to being a “raging, argumentative feminist.” Critics even suggest that the rise of postfeminist discourses has “closed down the space for articulating any sense of unfairness or oppression in social relations” (Joanne Baker 2010, 190).

Rottenberg (2014; see also Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg 2020) has spoken of neoliberal feminism, which, unlike postfeminism, avows gender inequality while sharing the post feminist belief in enterprising individuals. Neoliberal feminism has gained visibility particularly with prominent, elite women in the US openly embracing feminism. The key tenet in neoliberal feminism is that it produces neoliberal governmentality, which drives individual competitiveness and incites feminist subjects to accept responsibility for their well-being and futures (Rottenberg 2014).

### *Stigma management strategies*

Both of the reviewed feminisms view women’s labor as critical to resolving inequality. Nonetheless, they hold different stances toward feminism and antifeminism. In this paper, we use Goffman’s stigma strategies as a conceptual means to examine the dynamics of the different feminisms and their uses in media.

The awareness of the stigmatizing aspects of one’s identity or the possibility of stigma by association causes the stigmatized groups to use particular strategies to cope with and manage the situation. Stigma management strategies include managing the disclosure of stigmatizing information about oneself, normalization, and dissociating from stigmatized identities to avoid interaction with people from non-stigmatized groups (Renee R. Anspach 1979; David A Snow and Leon Anderson 1987). Normalization (Goffman 1963) portrays the stigmatized in a positive light and aims to convey their “normality.”

To give an example, Sammy Toyoki and Andrew D. Brown (2014) discuss how prisoners imply their normality by emphasizing their fit with societal norms, such as fatherhood. Other strategies include the use of “disidentifiers” (Goffman 1963), which refers to covering their identity by disassociating from the undesired attribute; for example, a gay athlete exhibiting hypermasculinity through sexual comments toward women. The stigmatized can also escape stigmatization by redirecting attention from the stigmatizing aspects through deflection (Goffman 1963); for example, by claiming another stigmatized label that is more easily accepted, such as a pansexual person presenting as bisexual (Jason Orne 2013). In the case of advocacy, the stigmatized proudly proclaim their stigmatized identity and espouse the stigmatizing aspects of their persona (Goffman 1963; Diane E. Taub, Penelope A. McLorg and Patricia L. Fanflik 2004).

## Methodology

This paper examines how the issue of gender, particularly regarding women’s (under) representation in the video game industry, is framed in the Finnish and US mainstream news media. Our motivation for analyzing media texts lies in the fact that mass media has significant power in creating a shared reality and deciding what stories are told and what voices are silenced (Marx Ferree 2004). The articles were collected from major daily and business magazines or periodicals, public broadcasters, and online publishers. We were interested in examining the discourse in a “traditional” media setting that is consumed by the business audience and the wider public.

When building the corpus, we worked toward finding articles that directly address the gender equality in the video game industry or that featured women working in the industry (e.g., stories of female game developers and female-led companies). We sourced the texts through the selected media outlets’ web archives and search tools and cross-checked them via Google using search words such as “gender/equality and video game industry” and “women and video game company/video game development.” In the US, our search resulted in several outcomes, whereas in Finland, we received fewer hits. We modified our search by using Finnish company names or the names of female managers and game developers (given that Finland is a small country, we know of the companies and women who typically hit media headlines) to also access Finnish stories that portrayed women working in video game companies.<sup>1</sup> The article types included in our study were personal stories, interviews with women in the industry, stories about video game companies, columns specifically addressing the issue of gender in the industry, and longer articles about gender and diversity in the industry.

We analyzed 91 articles in English and Finnish published between January 2014 and the end of December 2018. The Finnish corpus consisted of 58 articles in two newspapers with nationwide circulation: *Aamulehti* (7) and *Helsingin Sanomat* (13); a multichannel news outlet focusing on economic phenomena, *Kauppalehti* (8); a weekly business magazine, *Talouselämä* (21); the Finnish National Broadcaster, *Yle* (8); and a small independent and critically oriented online media, *Reunamedia* (1). The US corpus consisted of 33 articles in three periodicals—*Bloomberg* (including *Bloomberg Tech* and *Business Week*) (4), *Forbes* (2), and the US and international editions of *The Guardian* (15)—and in the dailies, *LA Weekly* (3), the *Los Angeles Times*, (5) and *The New York Times* (4). The selected media outlets from both countries represent liberal media. In Finland, the mainstream

media outlets are in general liberal, whereas US media outlets range more broadly. Especially in the US, stories appearing in politically conservative-leaning media outlets may have a different outlook and approach to reporting (see Kaitlynn Mendes 2011a).

We followed critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1992), allowing us to build our analysis from micro-linguistic expressions of stigma to the stigma strategies at the discourse practice level and to examine the way these strategies were interlinked with different feminist discourses in society. We began our analysis by reviewing headlines and browsing through the main content of the texts. Finnish headlines typically drew on gender-neutral expressions, such as *young CEO* and *drama game developer*. However, US headlines not only mentioned gender but also used vivid metaphorical expressions, such as in the headline “Saluting the Women behind the Screen: Those Underappreciated Female Video Game Pioneers” (Chris Suellentorp 2014). Altogether, the main body of the US media appeared to assume a more visible feminist stance, as the texts dealt extensively with the industry’s gender imbalance and emphasized the importance of promoting gender equality, whereas the Finnish texts rarely addressed gender issues.

In the second analysis, we examined how stigma was constructed in the texts. In the US texts, the stigma of feminism was easier to identify given that the texts directly spoke of the threats toward women who had been involved with feminist initiatives or who had been labeled feminist critics in the industry. For the Finnish texts, the existence of stigma was less evident, and it was apparent, for example, in the way that the journalists “hedged” when writing about gender issues and in how the female industry representatives opposed the label of “woman in games,” which addressed their anomaly.

In the final analysis, we drew on Goffman (1963) to examine the types of stigma management strategies mobilized in the media texts. We examined the social meanings and values attached to the impact of gender on women’s careers, the portrayal of women, and attitudes toward gender inequality and reducing the gender imbalance by examining the wording, style, modality, and rhetoric used in the texts (see Fairclough 1992, 231–238). The analysis of the stigma strategies necessitated an examination of how the strategies used were drawn into the different types of feminist discourses of postfeminism and neoliberal feminism. In parallel with the textual analysis, we identified how the texts drew on different iterations of contemporary feminist discourse, giving rise to stigma strategies unique in the feminism debate. We show that the stigma of feminism is managed through five distinct forms of stigma management: *extension*, *normalization*, and *advocacy* (adopted from Goffman) and *distancing* and *indignation*, which are specific to Finnish encounters with feminism.

We next present our key findings, outlining how discursive stigma management strategies were mobilized to navigate the stigma of feminism and how the strategies reproduced different types of contemporary feminist discourses.

## **Stigma management in the US and Finnish media**

In this section, we describe the five strategies that were used in the media. Our findings demonstrated that extension was used in both countries in a rather similar manner. Normalization also appeared in both countries, but it evinced different kinds of gendering processes. Advocacy only appeared in the US media texts, and the latter two strategies, distancing and indignation, only appeared in the Finnish texts. We begin with the two strategies that were used in both the US and Finnish media: extension and normalization.



We thereafter discuss the three strategies that were unique to either one of the contexts: advocacy in the US texts and distancing and indignation in the Finnish texts.

### ***Extension: moving beyond the “women’s issue” as a common thread for US and Finnish media***

The extension strategy draws on deflection (Goffman 1963) to claim a feminist position that reframes the issue as a wider concern over equality and a question of diversity rather than solely a question of women and gender. This is explained through the following excerpt from the US corpus:

“It’s really important for us to get young female talent because they are the future,” Ross [general manager of 343 Studios] said (...). ‘It’s important to have leadership roles across the industry that people can aspire to.’”

...

“It’s important when you’re trying to attract people to your platform that you have content that represents the diversity on the planet,” and diverse studio staff can help do that, Spencer [head of Xbox division] said. (Basak and Bass 2014)

This shows how Ross’s and Spencer’s rhetoric makes references to providing role models for “people” and attracting “people” rather than explicitly talking about the need to attract “women.” By speaking about “people” and “diverse studio staff,” Spencer’s discourse distances itself from feminist aims and frames itself as a matter of catering to everyone on the planet.

Extension strategy similarly appeared in the Finnish media by broadening the question to a wider diversity issue. A Finnish CEO articulates the following:

It’s true that there are few women in the industry, but I don’t think they should be specifically encouraged in some way—people, in general, should be. Certain gender roles and expectations still persevere for boys and girls. It feels like the best thing a girl can do is teach or be a doctor. (Minna Ohtamaa 2015, original in Finnish)

Rather than speaking for women alone, it seemed important to mention how stereotypes also affect men. While declaring her support for promoting gender equality and the importance of the topic, the female CEO draws on extension strategy, which reframes the question as an issue that goes beyond gender. We read this avoidance of addressing the issue of women alone as a sign of stigma. Moreover, the use of extension allows making the topic more attractive to a wider audience by claiming that this is not merely a women’s issue but also one of equality in terms of other minority groups. We argue that this is a sign of postfeminism because extending the issue to all obscures the importance of feminism. There also exist some echoes of neoliberal feminism in the sense of recognizing the gender stereotypes that affect women’s career choices.

### ***Normalization: neutering dangerous feminism in the US: building fit through masculinity in Finland***

The normalization strategy (Goffman 1963) was used in ways that portrayed women and the stories of women in a positive light through careful management of their masculine

and feminine characteristics. In the US texts, the normalization strategy centrally focused on avoiding associations with radical feminists. The portrayal of women through media-friendly attributes, including physical beauty (Banet-Weiser 2018), appeared predominantly for US normalization. We interpret this as a sign of the postfeminist resurgence of sexual difference (Rosalind Gill 2007). A Bloomberg article features Bonnie Ross, the manager of one of Microsoft's game studios:

Five-foot-6 with long brown hair and an easy smile, Ross is athletic and direct and betrays no trace of the awkward intensity common among engineers. Nor does she wear the kooky fan-themed T-shirts that are the standard outfit of most game developers. At E3 [Electronic Entertainment Expo, a yearly gaming event] she has on a leather jacket, jeans, and black leather boots. If she's nervous, she's covering well, staying upbeat. Still, she jerks to attention when Terry Myerson enters. "Sorry," Ross tells me, excusing herself. "My boss just showed up." (Joshua Brustein 2015)

The excerpt above produces normality through its practices of describing the woman's look. Ross is normalized in the eyes of other female readers (she is not "kooky," with "no trace of awkward intensity") by distancing from the nerd stereotype. Ross's strength and masculinity are enforced by referring to her "athletic" figure and "direct" manner. Her ability to exercise power in a male-dominated environment is ensured and enforced by making note of her black leather outfit. The journalist's reference to her possible "nervousness" is a way of providing a subtle reminder of her gender and vulnerability. According to Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018), women's entry into the video game industry poses a threat to masculine domination, which may explain why readers need to be reminded of traditional gender order. Yet, Ross is described as "staying upbeat," and she is thus lauded for her ability to successfully control her psyche and perform postfeminist femininity (Gill and Orgad 2017). The normalization strategy constructs Ross as "fitting" in both masculine and feminine contexts (Adamson 2017) and enables the stories to be maintained in a positive light for different audiences.

The next quote from *The Guardian* shows how the stigma of being a feminist is also normalized by presenting the feminist agenda in de-politicized terms:

Acknowledging the existence of women and reflecting that in video games is not positive discrimination. People are not asking for every single game to star a female protagonist; they are asking for more than literally one or two titles a year to star a female protagonist. They're asking for it to be an option.

(..)

It's not just women who are fed up with always seeing the same kinds of protagonists in video games. It's pretty much everyone. (Keza MacDonald 2014)

This normalization strategy breaks down the negative stigma of feminism by de-politicizing what it means to be a feminist. In the above quote, the negative associations of feminism are lessened by offering a neutered conceptualization of feminist goals. Rather than viewing feminist initiatives as extreme attempts by women to remove all masculinity in games, the text positions them as a movement that strives to create an equal representation of both genders.

Unlike the US texts, in the Finnish texts, normalization appears by avoiding overly feminine or feminist storytelling. Whereas US texts drew on postfeminist portrayals of

bodily beauty and femininity, the Finnish media normalized women in the industry by emphasizing their fit with the masculine domain as one of the boys. *Kauppalehti* featured two women in the industry in a story headlined “Women in games laugh together”:

Meri-Tuulia Rautavuori managed to combine two things as she entered Unity Finland: the video game industry and a female superior, Sonja Ängeslevä. These two are an anomaly at their office as well as in the entire video game industry.

“I was 20 minutes late from the interview. Sonja said that this was it then. It was humor, outspokenness that is typical of her. I figured that this is a strong person; she’s not garrulous.” (Kauppalehti 2017)

The opening paragraph acknowledges the gender imbalance in the industry. However, the text shifts to discuss one of the interviewed woman’s attributes in a manner that highlights her fit in the industry. This echoes the postfeminist ethos that calls upon technologies of confidence as a solution for women struggling to dismantle barriers (Gill and Orgad 2017).

Kati Levoranta, the CEO of Rovio Entertainment, tells Talouselämä how growing among boys has equipped her with the right type of attitude:

“I have a big brother, and our block was practically filled with boys. I played with them all sorts of games, from hockey to baseball. In order to cope in that group, one had to push oneself to the limits. I believe that this background has helped later on in working life,” Levoranta says. (Elina Lappalainen 2017).

The analysis revealed that their experiences as the only women in these groups provided them with a strong sense of normality concerning male-dominated environments. Levoranta bridges her youth experiences as having been an insider to a male-dominated group to the workplace to explain her sense of ease and non-trouble with her marginal role as a woman. Her discourse assumes competition as a taken-for-granted part of boys’ social bonding and male-dominated work life. Nonetheless, her insider status as “one of the boys” blinds her from gendered practices, which place the requirements to “push oneself” solely upon women.

### ***Advocacy: “Super Mario Sisters” and other heroines in the US battle for equality***

The strategy of *advocacy* (see Taub, McLorg and Fanflik 2004) only appeared in the US media texts. It was visible in the journalistic practices, as they advocated for gender equality initiatives and embraced the success some women had made in the industry. Furthermore, the female industry practitioners proclaimed that they were feminists, openly stating their experiences of gender discrimination and pleading for the need to fight for gender equality in the video game industry. Tracy Fullerton, a game designer and professor, declares having a feminist agenda:

“We live in a culture where the first impulse is to have a male main character, to assume a male gaze on the screen”(...)“That’s got to change. Young women need characters to have as role models” (Todd Martens 2016)

Graduate student Allison Comrie shares Fullerton’s concerns:

"That's why I'm here. That's why a lot of us are here. We want to make games that show women—or different people—in a better light so it can perpetuate a community that's more unified and diverse." (Martens 2016)

In line with neoliberal feminism, the above quotes acknowledge the existence of gender inequalities. Claiming that there is a necessity for change—"that's got to change" in the first quote—was typical in the US media and so was the women's self-positioning as game-changers for whom the rationale for their work was to change the gender equilibrium. Advocacy included inverting the meaning of the term "feminism" into a positive one by embracing the women who stand up for their rights, as well as by explaining the positive outcomes that will arise from promoting equality (Marx Ferree 2004, 90, 92). Here, feminism is thought to be achieved by affecting the game products on the market. With a growing female video game-playing population, such targets are more easily intertwined with neoliberal market logic.

The US media texts supported the idea that achieving gender equality remains in the hands of individual women, emphasizing women's agency. The previous quote of Tracy Fullerton appeared in a story headlined "Super Mario Sisters? At USC [University of Southern California], Women Now Outnumber Men in Video Game Design Graduate Program" (Martens 2016). The celebration of women "outnumbering" men follows a neoliberal feminist worldview. The metaphoric choice of "Super Mario Sisters" also echoes power feminism in the sense that it celebrates the success of young women. The neoliberal undertone was also perceptible in the way that the US stories relied predominantly on stories that singled out individual women who had triumphed in the industry ("If the Video Game Industry Ever Becomes Gender-Balanced, You Should Thank Tracy Fullerton", Liz. Ohanesian 2015) and neglected activist-oriented political collectives to combat inequality.

### ***Distancing: the "nonexistent" gender trouble in Finland***

The Finnish texts eschewed the recognition and voicing of female disadvantage. We identified the use of *distancing* in the Finnish media, which appeared to reproduce postfeminist sensibilities through the "relocating of gender inequalities to other places" and framing it as a bygone era (Gill et al. 2017, 227).

For example, a female journalist recites the making of a documentary on a female video game designer: "I wanted to tell how it is being a woman in a male-dominated industry, but the whole question made me uncomfortable. For real, can we not already bypass this in 2015 Finland?" (Kaisa Alenius 2015, original in Finnish). The reflection of one's emotions as "uncomfortable" reveals the unease with raising gender inequality issues and the potentially negative label associated with a feminist position. Through the expression "for real," the journalist makes use of the idea of gender discrimination as a bygone era and suggests that in a gender-egalitarian Finnish context, this should no longer be an issue. Postfeminism seems to offer an easily relatable discourse in Finland, where beliefs in equality already achieved typically cause resistance to inequality initiatives (see Ylöstalo 2019).

The Finnish discourse intertextually draws on US media debates. We provide an example of one Finnish story that attempts to make sense of the Gamergate phenomenon

(an online antifeminist movement directed at female critics in video games) and explain it to the Finnish audience:

**Within the games media**, the outrage and juxtaposition are seen as so severe that the matter is hard to talk about at all. The *Pelit* magazine [a games magazine], for example, did not want to comment on it at all initially.

Later on, the magazine sent an email offering information on Gamergate.

“Good grief, where to even begin when it comes to this mess,” says Editor-in-Chief of the *Pelaaja* magazine Miika Huttunen for his part.

Because of his work, Huttunen has been following the development of the conflict at hand. Still, he is unable to name a single story in which the matter would be addressed impartially and analytically.

“When you’re reading these stories written by the different sides, you get a different picture every time of what the issue really is,” Huttunen says. (Jutta Sarhimaa 2014, original in Finnish)

The statements from an expert in the Finnish video game industry (an editor-in-chief) in the above quotation suggest that what has been labeled as a cultural war by the US media is a trivial issue in the Finnish context. The lack of interest in talking about the issue results in silence around the gender topic, claiming that it is “taboo” or a “stigma”. The editor’s pejorative response (“Good grief, where to even begin”) serves to frame the gender inequality debate as unmeaningful and as a fuss.

### ***Indignation: the emotional resistance to being the “token” woman in Finland***

In the Finnish media, reactions to gender inequality also received more direct resistance, and we were able to detect a stigma-management strategy that was characteristic of the Finnish media texts. In contrast to the advocacy by US women of their roles as women in the video game industry and their open sharing of their desire to reveal their hardships, women in the Finnish texts appeared more at unease with gender issues. We identified that, through *indignation*, women eschewed taking an inferior position. In one media story, a female CEO reported that she has not fallen victim to gender discrimination, and she denied the impact of gender:

When I took up my position, the press went wild. After all, I was a young woman, not to mention a CEO, in the games industry. What they did a lot was trying to dig up drawbacks about how it’s so difficult to be a female in a predominantly male industry. So, there was a time when I just lost my temper and told a reporter that it’s only your skills that matter, not what’s between your legs.

The same goes for my employees: I always hire the most qualified employee; gender makes no difference to me. And even if I am struggling, that’s for an entirely different reason from me being a woman. (Ohtamaa 2015, original in Finnish)

This quote is illustrative of the indignation strategy, with the interviewed woman displaying her frustration and “indignation” over being asked to address gender inequality. Through the indignation strategy, the CEO denies sexism in her personal experience and the video game industry at large and expresses her anger and resentment over being considered the weaker sex. Instead, the woman distances herself from any feminist

agenda. The manager's claim that "it's only your skills that matter" rejects the idea that there might be sexism in the industry and echoes an unquestioned belief in equality, which is typical of the Finnish equality parlance (Ylöstalo 2019). For her, the gender issue is a trivial matter, and we interpret her reactions to the media also as a sign of "gender fatigue" (Elisabeth K. Kelan 2009). It was typical of the Finnish media discourse that the female managers shunned the "female CEO" label and wanted to be recognized for their talents, rather than as representatives of their gender (see Mary C. Mattis 1993). These examples can be interpreted as echoing a postfeminist sensibility in their rejection of the role of gender and in rendering gender-equal explanations of success at work. In one example, a female CEO expressed her dislike of being titled a "woman in games" by rejecting the idea through a laconic expression:

'My gender is very irrelevant to what I do,'Hallikainen says.'I'm just a CEO, thank you very much. My gender is not part of my title.'(Tanja Vasama 2017, original in Finnish)

The selected quote above is an illustration of how the Finnish texts undermined the role of gender in contemporary workplaces using postfeminist vocabulary (Gill 2007, Rosalind Gill 2016; Kelan 2009). The use of the indignation strategy operated as a very powerful discursive means to silence the debate on gender in games.

## Discussion

We critically analyze how US and Finnish media stories depict the issue of women and gender inequality in the context of the video game industry. We draw on Goffman's concept of stigma to analyze how engaging in the gender debate includes the potential threat of being stigmatized due to feminist positioning. Our research illustrates that the expression of feminist representations of women in games is managed in the media through discursive stigma management strategies. As an empirical contribution, we identify five distinct discursive stigma management strategies, also demonstrating how the nature of raising gender issues and the respective uses of stigma strategies occur differently in the two national contexts. We outline the five strategies of stigma management in Table 1.

We indicate how the issue of gender receives more visible coverage and more politically loaded treatment in US media, where the topic of gender and gender inequality is openly addressed and supports women's liberation. In US texts, gender imbalance surfaces as the main topic with a politically loaded "feminist" agenda and vocabulary, such as "cultural war." Thus, US texts show how the idea of gender inequality is deeply embedded in the selected media outlets' discourse, which manifests a feminist stand. Our findings align with Marx Ferree's (2004) notions that the mobilization of social movements is enhanced in the United States. However, we also acknowledge that the antifeminist practices within the US video game industry are so severe and obvious that it offers an easy platform for the media's feminist agenda. We further argue that the absence of distancing and indignation strategies in the US texts may reflect cultural ease in addressing gender inequality issues.

Accordingly, the use of "advocacy" in the US media lauds women for entering the industry and positions them as "fighters." In the US media, women who have succeeded in the industry are portrayed as heroic characters fighting against masculine power.

**Table 1.** Stigma management strategies.

Stigma management strategy	Characteristics	Uses in the US media	Uses in the Finnish media	Feminist ideology at play
Extension	Reframing the issue as a question of diversity rather than a question of gender	Relabeling the gender inequality issue as a wider diversity issue		Postfeminism
Normalization	Balancing femininity and masculinity in representations of women	Positive representation through fit to masculine roles of games and feminine social roles of women Emphasizing women's femininity and vulnerability as a means of neutering	Emphasizing masculine fit as a means of avoiding the image of a gender story	Postfeminism
Advocacy	Espousing feminist values and the importance of fighting for gender equality	Embracing the confidence and achievements of women in the video game industry	Not used	Neoliberal feminism
Distancing	Framing the gender debate as a trivial matter in the speaker's own context	Not used	Distanced gender discrimination from personal experiences and cited gender inequality as a problem that does not exist in Finland/Fin	Postfeminism
Indignation	Expressing indignation over being addressed as representative of one's gender Denial of gender's impact on own career	Not used	Emotional opposition to the gender debate; unwillingness to be celebrated as a woman in gaming or to frame hardships as discrimination	Postfeminism

Following Veronika Koller (2004), such “overuse” of warrior and war metaphors to describe women signals hegemonic masculinity. The neoliberal ethos in the US texts allows articulation of feminist talk and women’s advances in the industry as a source of pride and individual celebration. We share Rosalind Gill’s concern (expressed in Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg 2020) for how these celebrations of the neoliberal feminist subject serve to marginalize other perspectives. The media texts analyzed in this paper only slightly address the role of organizational practices in producing a more equitable industry.

Even though the US texts appear rather “feminist” at first sight, our analysis reveals the contradictory nature of the “liberal” media outlets in the US: Despite their feminist message, the representations of women are embedded in heteronormative gender expectations, and they use feminine attributes, such as beauty, as a way to neuter the same female heroines the media so openly celebrates. This reveals the stigmatized nature of feminism despite contemporary public movements. The US media uses discourse to maintain women’s femininity to differentiate them from the “less desirable, feminist ‘types’” (Adamson 2017, 321). Our analysis shows how the US discourse skillfully employs the neoliberal feminist ethos in its admiration of female heroes, while simultaneously operating on a postfeminist sensibility, resting on the resurgence of sexual difference (Gill 2007) and necessitating active management of masculinity and femininity (Adamson 2017; Gill et al. 2017). Thus, a double standard exists in the US discourse.

Apart from the emphasis on traditional femininity, women are also normalized in male-dominated environments through masculine behaviors. The masculinization of women in gaming appears in both countries, but it is more evident in Finnish texts. Despite the repudiation of gender’s impact on career and work, the analysis reveals how the texts themselves are recognizably gendered. The texts utilize gender differences in ways that construct “positive” agency for women in the men’s world by emphasizing their masculine features. This suggests that in the Finnish cultural context, it is “easier” to characterize women in terms of their strength rather than their femininity, which may be rooted in the Finnish tradition of strong women (for a similar discussion, see Saija Katila and Päivi Eriksson 2013). This shows that even when the discourse aims to alter the gender order, women remain chained by gendered expectations.

One of the most remarkable differences in the Finnish media compared to the US is the journalists’ and the women’s tendency to not articulate disadvantage. We argue that the representational practices in the Finnish discourse are consequential in “shutting down” discussions of gender bias by “silencing” and “marginalizing” these topics. The Finnish media raise discussions of gender equality through an apologetic tone, and the extent or severity of inequality and sexism in the Finnish video game industry are downplayed through distancing, extension and indignation strategies. The overlapping of these strategies offers strong discursive means to frame gender inequality as a trivial matter while claiming equality for both sexes. Even though Finns consider gender equality an important value, there is a tendency toward the equality already achieved rhetoric (Ylöstalo 2019), and the indignation strategy in our empirical data illustrates how gender equality activities are sometimes met with irritation in practice (Ylöstalo 2019). We deem it problematic that women’s experiences of gender discrimination may be silenced by the practice of a few female icons in the industry who deny gender discrimination based on their personal experiences. As indicated by the absence of an “advocacy” strategy in the



Finnish texts, there is no space to discuss how gender might affect women's career advancement. This has little power to change the gender order in organizations and management. We argue that the discourse in the Finnish media signals the lack of preparedness to tackle questions of inequality within Finnish society. Whenever the gender issue is raised, it needs to be explained and justified. To conclude, we perceive that the discursive practices in the Finnish discourse may "mute" discussions of gender bias (Gill 2016, 613) and prevent women from disclosing discrimination for fear of social prejudice and discrimination (Vanessa Anastosopoulos and Serge Desmarais 2015).

We suggest that the discourses of the US and Finnish media are governed by the fear of being labeled as feminists. Feminism carries a negative label that invokes negative attitudes (Scharff 2012) and thus makes people, young women in particular, reluctant to identify with this stigmatized feminist identity (McRobbie 2009; Zucker 2004). However, in the US media, the stigma is recognized and mostly managed through positive uses of feminism, whereas the Finnish discourse silences the topic. While the neoliberal feminist celebration of female industry pioneers champions women's participation in gender equality initiatives in the US, the postfeminist tone of the Finnish media representation may discourage the public espousing of feminist identities. Thus, although both countries share a similar outlook in terms of the number of women making games, their discursive framings of the situation are different. The differences in approaching gender inequality may be partially explained by the support structures for equality within Finnish society (e.g., extensive maternity leave) in comparison to the US, where such arrangements are lacking. Finland is often depicted as a pioneer in gender equality (see Susan Meriläinen, Janne Tienari, Saija Katila, and Yvonne Benchoy 2009), which may explain its tendency to draw on gender-neutral rhetoric. Nevertheless, one must ask: to what extent is the reluctance to raise concerns over female disadvantage due to Finns being lulled into a sense of achieved gender equality? We suggest that this issue be addressed in future studies through the examination of the stigma of feminism in other gender-egalitarian settings.

For this paper, we focus on news articles and "serious" outlets that represent liberal media. In Finland, mainstream media outlets are generally liberal, whereas US media outlets cover a wider range. Thus, especially in the US, stories appearing in politically conservative-leaning media outlets may have different outlooks and approaches to reporting (see Mendes 2011a). Studies on the reporting in games industry trade articles or other popular press may offer new perspectives upon the portrayal of gender, as well as the variety of feminisms at play. The debates taking place in different contexts may also have great influence in contemporary society, but they are also likely to deal with the issue differently (e.g., social media may expound more polarized debates on gender).

In this article, we examine how stigma management strategies address gender inequality to avoid stories being interpreted as overly feminist and to allow for the positive representation of women who have made inroads into the male-dominated field of video game design. We propose that the linkages between stigma and various forms of feminist ideology require further empirical research and conceptualization. In particular, we propose the value of using stigma as one lens to uncover the manifestations of feminism in different contexts.

## Note

1. A similar procedure was repeated using the names of women often characterized in US stories to verify that we had not omitted stories from the US corpus, even though our methodology did not necessitate including total media coverage.

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