



Spaces to Play, Spaces to Act

Exploring the Political, Cultural and
Democratic Dimensions of Gaming in Germany

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Foreword

Over the past few decades, gaming has become a key part of people's individual lived realities and social interactions. Today, gaming is a formative pillar of modern culture.

As part of the creative industry, the economic relevance of gaming in all its facets is widely recognized. Nevertheless, there is surprisingly little reliable evidence about gaming, particularly with regard to its identity- and discourse-shaping dimensions. As a result – especially outside gaming communities – there is a vague image of people who play digital games that is often characterized by stereotypes and prejudices. Important actors and arenas of the democratic body politic have almost no connection to gaming communities. Early developments in the digital discourse space are therefore often overlooked or misunderstood, both in terms of possible negative feedback loops and positive potential for shaping the future.

Young people – in Germany and elsewhere – spend a particularly large amount of time playing digital games and identify themselves as part of gaming communities to an above-average extent. A formative phase in young people's lives – including in political terms – is increasingly unfolding in the digital realm. If we want to better understand young people and get them more involved in shaping the future of Germany, then an important step would be to better understand and recognize the spheres, codes, modes of interaction, and cultural forms of expression associated with gaming.

With this survey of the socio-political attitudes of digital game players in Germany and study of the potential of digital spaces for promoting democracy in the country – which are particularly focused on young people – we aim to create a basis for evidence-based follow-up discussions as well as to provide impetus and recommendations for decision-makers involved in shaping social policies.

The results of the study challenge several commonly held misconceptions and show that the gaming sphere and gaming communities are diverse instead of homogeneous. Gaming can: divide but also unite; reinforce loneliness but also counteract it through community and friendship; encourage lethargy but also facilitate social engagement in both the digital and analog worlds; discourage learning but also provide effective learning opportunities; expose hate speech and group-focused enmity but also vigorously counter them with an image of tolerance and respect. In the end, the gaming world is a reflection of our society, albeit with very different forms of expression.

At the same time, gaming stands at a unique intersection between educational attainment, digitalization and social cohesion. The fact that this study results from a collaboration of three Bertelsmann Stiftung departments is a reflection of precisely this overlapping.

We would like to thank everyone who contributed to the study, both during and in the run-up to it, especially all participants in the "Roundtables Gaming & Democracy" organized by the Berlin-based Foundation for Digital Games Culture. We see this document as a springboard and an invitation for an in-depth, society-wide discourse on the potential of gaming to strengthen our democratic body politic. We invite all interested individuals to join us in discovering and shaping new opportunities for democratic coexistence in digital environments.

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1 | Introduction

1.1 Preliminary considerations

Digital games are part of everyday life for the majority of the population in Germany as well as an important part of youth cultures. Nevertheless, to date, there have not been any systematic studies that survey and analyze the political thoughts and actions of digital game players in a nuanced manner. Gaming communities and the associated platforms (e.g., Twitch, Discord and Reddit) represent important socialization spaces in which social orientations, values and affiliations are negotiated. Digital spaces shape culture – including its political dimension.

Although public interest in the interplay between games, digital public spheres and democracy has been growing for several years, many political and civil society actors approach the field with considerable wariness and, in some cases, dismiss it as a one-dimensional hotbed of radicalization. A lack of personal access, reservations and a certain skepticism toward gaming as a cultural practice prevent bridges from being built toward this cultural form. On the other hand, for a range of reasons, many gaming communities are reluctant to openly engage in dialogue with political or civil society actors.

This study is therefore explicitly meant to serve as a foundation for constructive bridge-building. The aim is to get players of digital games involved in the socio-political discourse and to take them seriously – not as a homogeneous group, but in all their diversity and with their often very different political positions and social experiences in the digital space. To this end, the study examines the often very differently used term “gamer” and differentiates it using a typology of its own, which is meant to aptly reflect the social heterogeneity of digital game players.

Against the backdrop of a gaming ecosystem that is mostly commercially dominated, this survey aims to provide ideas and impetus for education, democracy-promoting educational efforts and digital participation, especially of young people. The study shows where risks lie. But, most importantly, it highlights the potential that digital spaces offer for democratic participation, social integration and political education.

1.2 Methodology

The data for this study was collected by pollytix strategic research gmbh on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung. Data collection was carried out as a quota sampling using the Bilendi/Respondi online panel (computer-assisted web interview, or CAWI). With its approximately 300,000 participants in Germany, this panel is large enough to meet all desired quotas while offering high data quality at the same time. Bilendi/Respondi is certified according to ISO 20252:2019 and is a member of the BVM (the professional association of German market and social researchers), ESOMAR (the European Society for Opinion and Market Research), and DGOF (the German Society for Online Research), among others.

The representative survey of internet users on which this study is based has an advantage over surveys of digital game players in that it allows comparisons to be made between players and the total sample as well as with people who are verifiably non-players. A total of 6,435 internet users aged 16 and above were surveyed. Although gaming is a recreational activity enjoyed by all generations, the intensity with which the medium is used points to increased interest among younger age groups. For this reason, the number of respondents aged between 16 and 24 and between 25 and 34 was disproportionately high (known as a “boost”; 16- to 24-year-olds: $n=471$; 25- to 34-year-olds: $n=450$) in order to ensure a particularly robust data basis for these groups. Since the focus was on the socio-political outlooks of digital game players, people under the age of 16 were not included in the survey.

To ensure representativeness, the data was weighted in accordance with official statistics. This overall sample is representative of the total population of internet users from the age of 16 in Germany. At the same time, thanks to the boost in the younger age groups, it also provides sufficient cases for analyzing different types of players.

The maximum statistical error tolerance is ± 1.2 percentage points for a 95% confidence interval. The survey was conducted between March 10 and 25, 2025.

In order to make possible the survey of gaming communities in Germany, comprehensively tested and proven items from other studies were used, including the Mitte Study of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (Zick et al. 2023), the “Deutschland und Israel heute: Zwischen Stabilität und Spannung” study of the Bertelsmann Stiftung (Vopel and Schulz 2025), the Leipzig Authoritarianism Study (Decker et al. 2024), the “How lonely are young adults in 2024” study (Steinmayr et al. 2024), and the “Gesellschaftlicher Zusammenhalt in Deutschland 2023” study (Boehnke et al. 2024).

Since there are currently no standardized and tested survey instruments for the classification and ecosystem-specific questioning of digital game players, new items were formulated for this study. The content of the items and the overall questionnaire were developed by the Bertelsmann Stiftung and the authors of this study in collaboration with pollytix. It was validated and revised by an interdisciplinary panel of experts made up of representatives from social research, game studies, media education and the games industry.

2 | Who plays? The types of players

2.1 Gamer, “Zocker,” player? Several terms, one meaning?

One fundamental difficulty in both collecting and analyzing the available data lies in labeling the groups and phenomena that can be identified within them. In everyday speech, people who enjoy playing digital games are often simply referred to as “gamers,” but this term is not as neutral as it is sometimes suggested to be. In particular, research from feminist, gender and queer studies has shown that not every person who might even describe themselves as a “fan” of digital games would also call themselves a “gamer” or be labeled as such by others who feel they belong to this group (e.g., Shaw 2012: 29).

In addition, studies and surveys on digital game players in general have long contradicted the stereotype that digital games are primarily played by young, white men in their teens. For example, “game e.V.,” the association of the German games industry, estimated that the average age of all German digital game players in 2024 was 38.2 years old and that 48% of them were women (game e.V. 2025: 7). Rather than being surprising, these figures are in line with the trends found both within and outside of Germany. Following initial research in the 2000s on specific phenomena, such as early online gaming (see, e.g., Williams et al. 2008), a more nuanced picture has emerged.

At the same time, and especially in German, it would be presumptuous to use the terms “gamer” and “player” interchangeably seeing that the term “gamer” has historically been closely associated with a culture that has long excluded people who did not fit the stereotype of a young, white, cis and heterosexual nerd. This is already evident from the terminology used. In English, the term “gamer girl” was used for female gamers for a long time, but it has now fallen out of fashion. In German, there was a similar development with “Zocker” and “Zockerweibchen,” which are roughly equivalent to “gamer” and “gamer girl,” respectively, although “Zocker” originally meant “gambler.” Particularly with regard to women and sexism, the resulting

tense relationship between female players and mainstream gaming cultures has been well researched since the 2000s. In addition, at the latest since GamerGate, an online harassment campaign that ran from 2014 to 2016, research has increasingly attempted to identify the causes of such a clear and obvious misogynistic backlash.

Against this backdrop, it can be considered a consensus that there is a connection between toxic nerd masculinities and misogyny in certain strands of gaming culture, and that this connection correlates strikingly often with terms such as “gamer” and “gamer culture” (e.g., Schott and Horrell 2000; Shaw 2014; Salter and Blodgett 2017; Condis 2018; Cote 2020; McDivitt 2020).

In addition to these potential experiences of discrimination and the associated political debates (especially since 2014), which may result in the conscious acceptance or rejection of the term, there is a historical dimension: In German-speaking countries, where “gamer” is an Anglicism, alternative terms have existed since the 1980s, such as “(computer) freak” (in English) or the aforementioned term “Zocker.” As a result, even today, individuals who still consider themselves fans of digital games may not identify with the term “gamer,” but rather with one of these alternative terms, simply because these terms were current at the time of their own socialization with the medium and, therefore, they may have never abandoned this self-designation.

In other words, the personal decision to identify oneself as someone who enjoys playing digital games with the term “gamer” can be influenced by a very wide variety of factors. It can signify self-identification and belonging to a group and culture, just as its rejection or non-use can represent a conscious positioning within or against that culture. This complex initial situation gives rise to a series of difficulties, which we also had to address in this study.

We deliberately only asked participants to identify themselves as “gamers” in order to determine their affiliation with specific gaming cultures. In addition, it was taken as a given that different age groups may understand the term differently and may not identify with it – as alternative terms, such as “Zocker” or “computer

(game) freak,” might be more popular in some cases. Since only the generic masculine German form of “gamer” was used in the survey questions, possible nuanced alternative forms – such as the female-specific (“Gamerin”) or gender-neutral (“Gamer:in”) forms – cannot be analyzed further.

2.2 The player types of this study

In order to formulate hypotheses about the concerns and views of the various player groups, it is necessary to categorize them and define them accordingly. The resulting types of players that we use for our analysis automatically have limitations in terms of their usefulness. Nevertheless, using these typologies is necessary in order to identify different cultures and their specific relationships to the medium of gaming as well as to determine similarities and differences.

For our analysis, we therefore distinguish between five types of players, whereby it should be noted that there may be a certain degree of overlap among the resulting groups.

1. **All players:** All respondents who stated that they play digital games on a device, regardless of what it is.
2. **Gaming enthusiasts (“gamers”):** All respondents who describe themselves as “gamers” and play games on a computer or console at least several times a week. This group could also be referred to simply as “gamers,” but we have chosen not to do so here for reasons of clarity, as the term can have a more general meaning in everyday speech than we are using it.

3. **Frequent players:** All respondents who would *not* describe themselves as “gamers” but still play games on a computer or console at least several times a week.
4. **Exclusively mobile players:** All respondents who stated that they play on mobile devices at least several times a week but do not play on any other platform. This category is independent of the self-identification as a “gamer.”
5. **Occasional players:** All respondents who play digital games less frequently than several times a week on any platform. This category is also independent of the self-identification as a “gamer.”

In addition to these categories of players, we include a sixth type in our analysis: **non-players**. As the name suggests, this group simply represents the comparison group of respondents who stated that they do not play digital games at all.

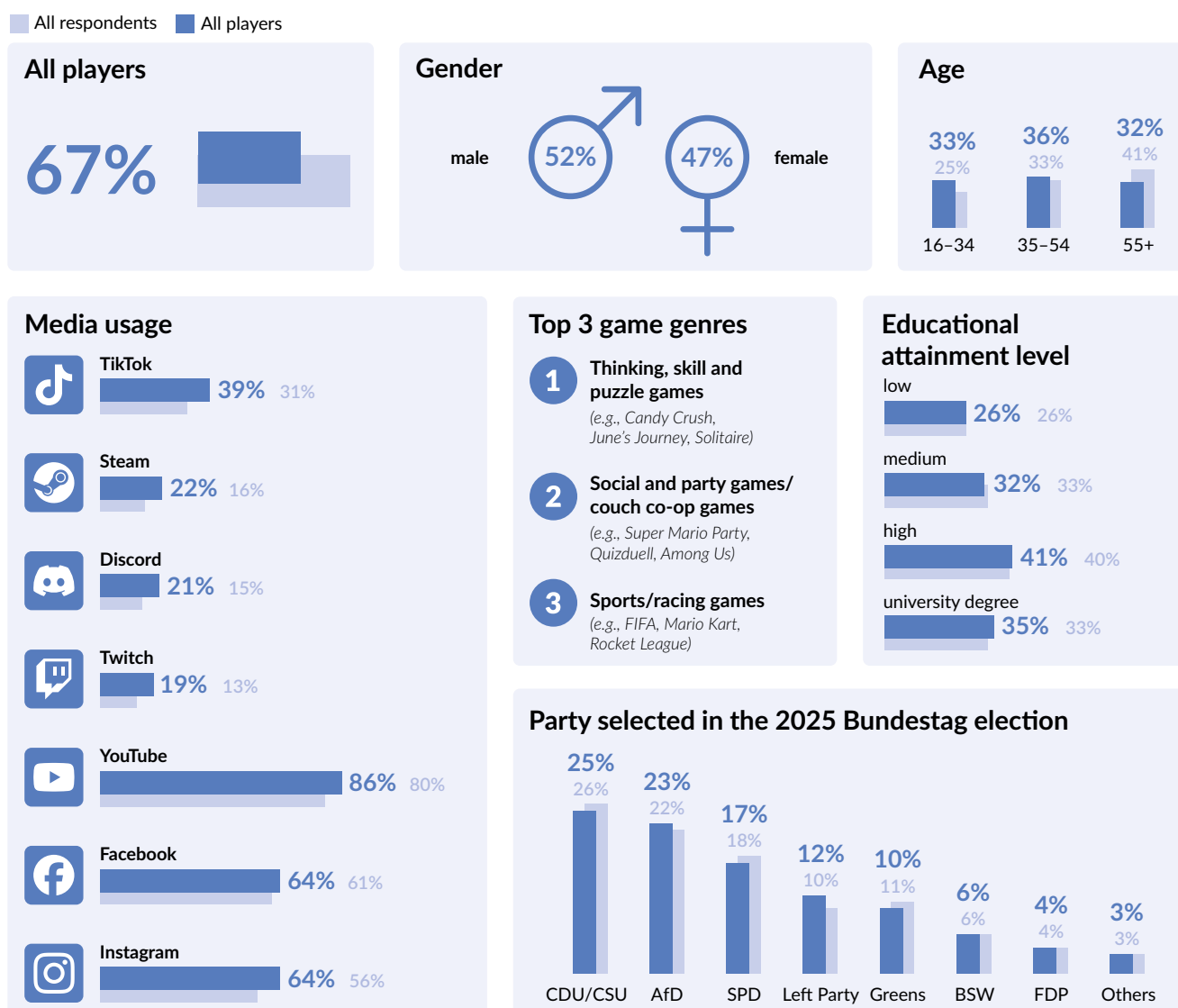
The terms listed here have been deliberately chosen to avoid reproducing frequently used pejorative terms and apparent contradictions (e.g., “casual gamer” and “core gamer”) and to instead describe what the respondents themselves stated in their answers. The two most important factors for these definitions are, first, whether a respondent would describe themselves as a “gamer” and, second, how often they play digital games and on which platform they do so.

The self-designation as a “gamer” can be understood as a cultural marker that does not necessarily say anything about gaming behavior, but at least indicates an affinity with certain gaming cultures. Both enthusiasts and frequent players play games at a high frequency on platforms that generally require a greater investment of time and/or money compared to other platforms (e.g., mobile games). Both groups therefore dis-

play relatively intensive gaming behavior and are also similar in size, with gaming enthusiasts accounting for 15% and frequent players accounting for 18% of the respondents. However, unlike enthusiasts, frequent players do not identify with the term “gamer.” The fact that identification with the term suggests cultural affiliation is also evident when looking at the other types of players. Indeed, although there are a few who identify themselves as “gamers” among those who play exclusively on mobile devices (6%) and occasional players (7%), these figures are negligible. The reasons for this can be varied and cannot be gleaned from the data, but this finding nevertheless underscores once again that “gamer” and identification with this term point to a cultural affiliation that goes beyond gaming behavior.

FIGURE 1 All players

All respondents who stated that they play digital games on any device.



Due to rounding, percentages do not always add up to 100. Basis: all players; weighted results.

Source: own depiction.

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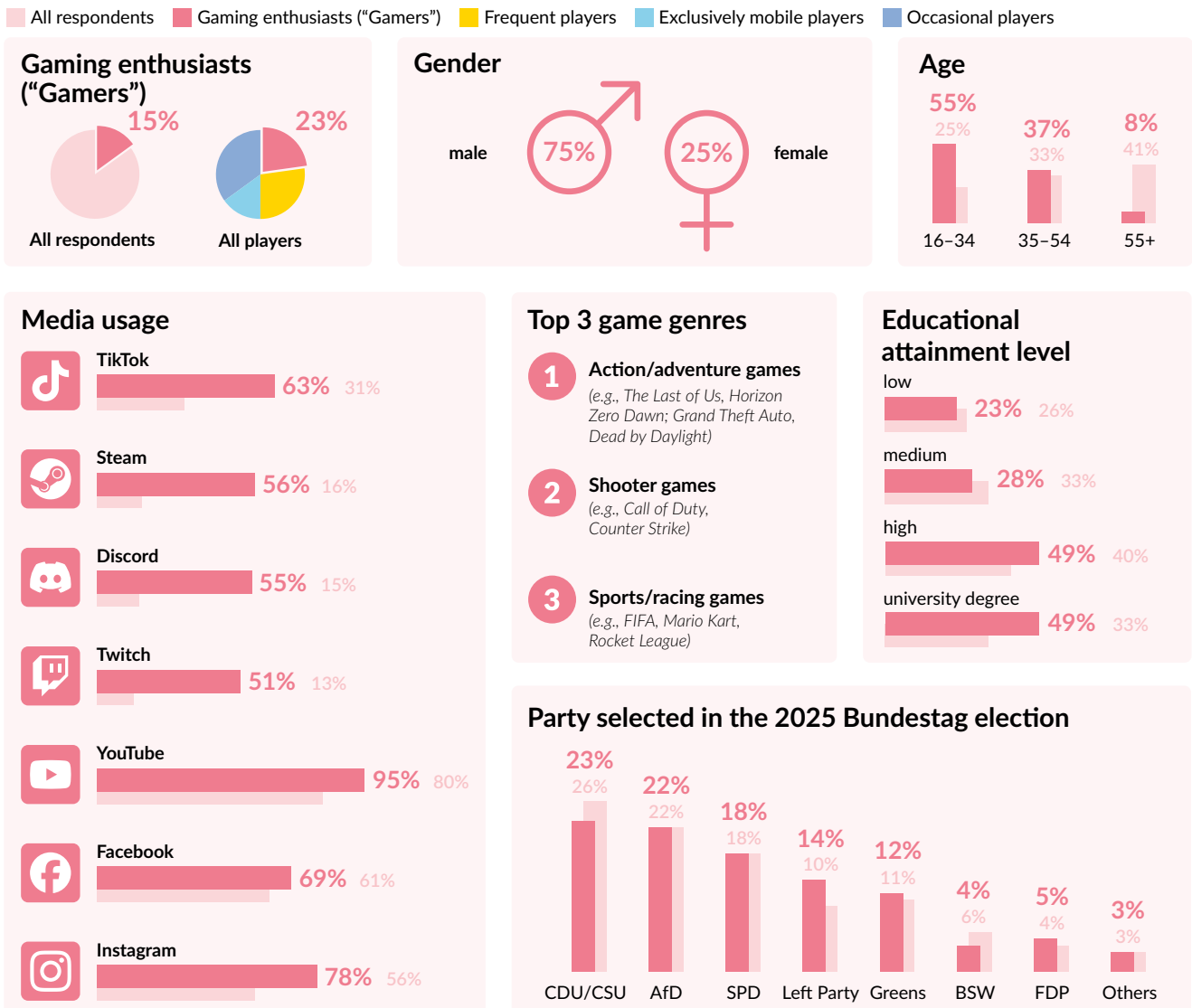
2.3 Demographic characteristics of the player types

From a demographic perspective, the composition of the above-defined groups is only surprising to a limited extent. Taking **all players** together (who made up 67% of all respondents), we arrive at a group that corresponds to the social average in many attitude characteristics, confirming what the gaming industry and others have been repeating for decades – namely, that digital games have by now become a normal part of everyday life.

In the group of all players, 47% identified as female and 52% as male, which largely corresponds to the results obtained, for example, by the German games industry association in its surveys of players in Germany (game e.V. 2025: 7). In addition, respondents in our study were able to indicate that they did not identify with binary gender categories. However, due to the low number of respondents in the non-binary category, no reliable statements can be made about individual player types, which is why they have been largely omitted.

FIGURE 2 Gaming enthusiasts (“Gamers”)

All respondents who identified themselves as “gamers” and play games on a computer or console at least several times a week.



Due to rounding, percentages do not always add up to 100. Basis: all players; weighted results.

Source: own depiction.

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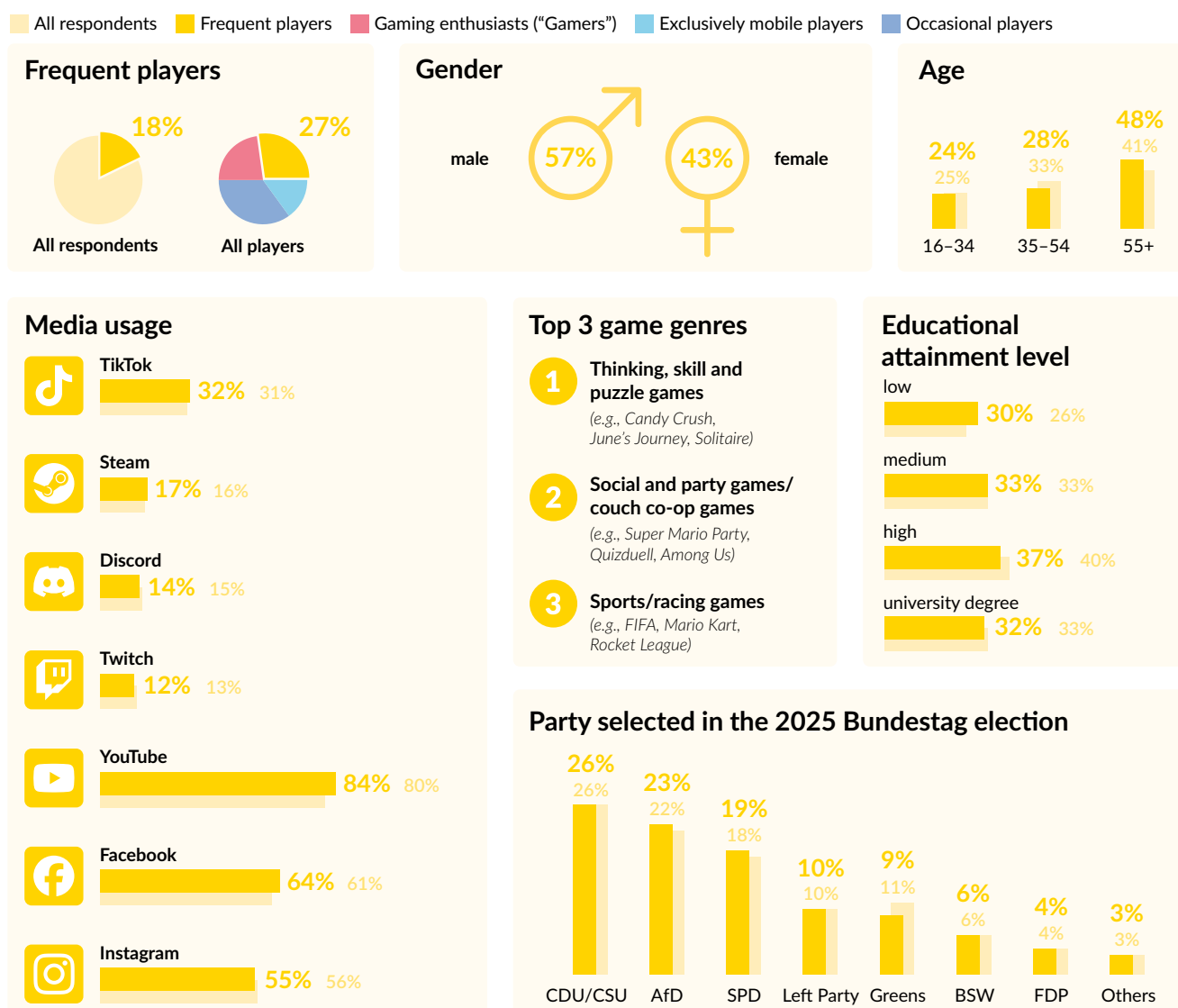
There are also few differences between all players and the total sample in terms of age distribution and level of educational attainment: 33% stated that they were between 16 and 34 years old, 36% that they were between 35 and 54 years old, and 32% that they were 55 years or older (see Figure 1). Thus, there is an almost even age distribution within this group.

Among the group of **gaming enthusiasts (“gamers”)**, who make up 23% of all players surveyed, a much clearer trend can be observed in terms of both age and gender. In this case, 75% said they were male, with the majority of this group (55%) belonging to the 16–34

age group, while only 8% said they were over 54 (see Figure 2). On the other hand, the middle age group (35- to 54-year-olds) accounts for 37%, which is similar to the proportion of all players. This combination is particularly interesting because it differs significantly from the group of **frequent players** (see Figure 3), even though the only difference between these two types in terms of their criteria is whether respondents consider themselves “gamers” or not. Of all players, 27% fall into this group, which is made up of 57% men and 43% women. Only 24% of respondents in this group are aged 16–34, 28% are aged 35–54, and the majority (48%) are aged 55 or older. Here, too, there is

FIGURE 3 Frequent players

All respondents who would not describe themselves as “gamers” but still play games on a computer or console at least several times a week.



Due to rounding, percentages do not always add up to 100. Basis: all players; weighted results.

Source: own depiction.

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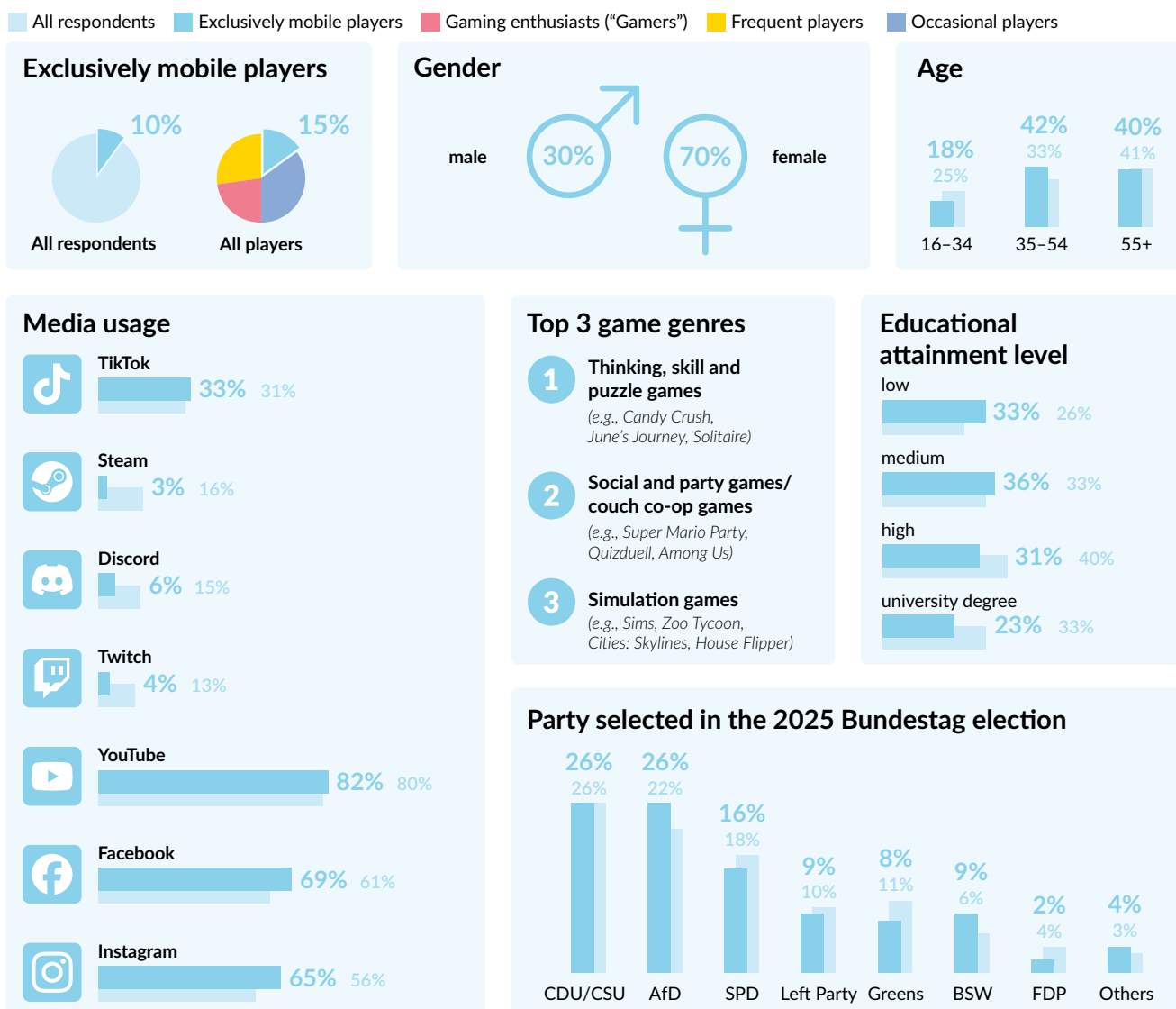
a general tension surrounding the concept of “gamers,” particularly in terms of gender distribution, but also in terms of possible generational differences.

Of all players, 15% belong to the group of **exclusively mobile players** (see Figure 4). In this subgroup, the gender ratios are almost the opposite of what was observed among gaming enthusiasts. In this case, 70% stated that they were women and the group of people under 35 is a minority, accounting for only 18% of the total. The majority of respondents of this type stated that they were older than 34, with 42% stating that they were between 35 and 54 years old and 40%

stating that they were 55 or older. However, given that this term refers to people who exclusively play digital games on mobile devices (e.g., smartphones and/or tablets), this composition is to be expected. Games on these platforms often require less time at a stretch or can be played on the go, making them a better fit for the everyday lives of adults 35 years old or older with professional or caregiving obligations. In addition, mobile games are usually more accessible to people who do not have any connection to gaming cultures, as these games are often initially available free of charge and also do not require any special hardware.

FIGURE 4 Exclusively mobile players

All respondents who stated that they play on mobile devices at least several times a week but do not play on any other platform.



Due to rounding, percentages do not always add up to 100. Basis: all players; weighted results.

Source: own depiction.

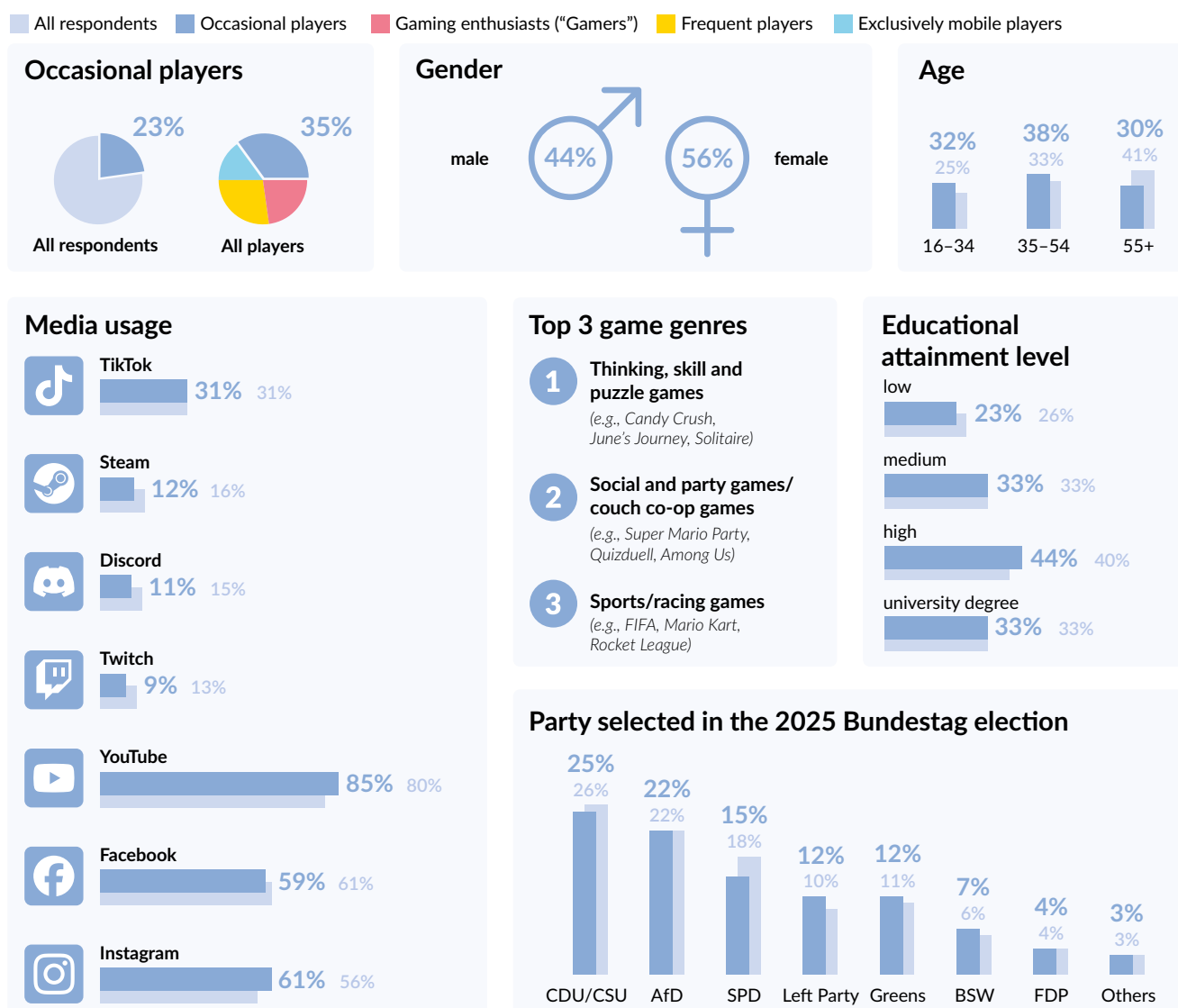
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Anyone who has a smartphone, which has by now become a very common everyday item, also has access to mobile games. The minority of exclusively mobile players who identify with the term "gamer" – even though mobile gaming (and exclusively mobile gaming, in particular) is often disparaged in mainstream gaming cultures – can possibly be explained by changes in their lives and getting older. These individuals may also have changed their gaming behavior over the years

but still identify with the term. The high proportion of women in this category is remarkable, but it could be explained by the fact that women typically shoulder a greater share of caregiving responsibilities, which may be more compatible with mobile gaming, as these games can often be played in short sessions or with interruptions.

FIGURE 5 Occasional players

All respondents who play digital games less frequently than several times a week on any platform.



Due to rounding, percentages do not always add up to 100. Basis: all players; weighted results.

Source: own depiction.

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Finally, there are the **occasional players** – meaning those who play digital games on any platform less than several times a week – who make up the largest group of players, with 35% of the total (see Figure 5). The composition of this group is particularly interesting in that it differs only slightly from the average of all players. Among the respondents in this group, 44% said they were men and 56% said they were women; the latter thus represent a majority, but the overall ratio is still fairly balanced. Similar to the findings for all players, the age groups of occasional players are

relatively evenly distributed: Only 32% of respondents in this group are aged 16–34, 38% are aged 35–54, and the majority (30%) are aged 55 or older. Even for this group, digital games appear to be a completely commonplace activity, with only relatively minor differences according to age or gender.

Additional details on platform usage, genres played, preferred game modes, etc. can be found in Tables A1 and A2 as well as Figure A1 in the Appendix.

3 | Democracy, politics, media and the issue of trust

3.1 Various political cultures within gaming communities

One of the findings of this study is that the stereotype of the apolitical digital game player needs to be reexamined in a more nuanced manner. Some well-known gaming influencers and streamers specifically use their enormous reach for political purposes. For examples, in 2019, YouTubers from the gaming scene (including some with millions of followers) called for protests against the EU copyright reform by mobilizing their fans to demonstrate against Article 13 of the new directive. Such actions indicate that at least some of the players are interested in politics and can be mobilized, at least on specific issues.

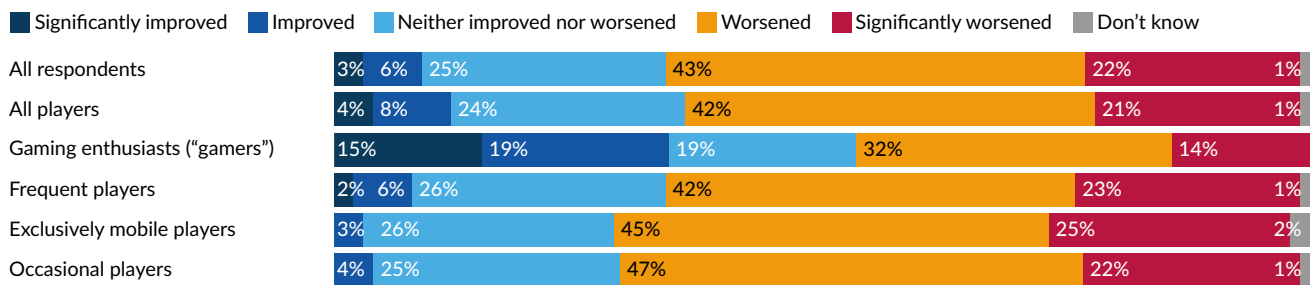
It also shows that digital game players are very much aware of how society perceives them and want to see their interests represented politically. For example, in 2019, many digital game players felt they were being defamed across the board and reacted with outrage when Horst Seehofer, Germany's interior minister at the time, said that "the gaming scene" needed to be monitored more closely following a right-wing extremist attack. Although there is still a lack of broad-based studies specifically on voter turnout among digital game players, the examples cited above suggest that gaming communities have political potential – both in terms of political participation (e.g., voting) and political engagement (e.g., protesting). In 2025, this was even worthy of an article in the German gaming magazine *PC Games* ("Call to all gamers: Go vote!") about a campaign in which gamers promote political awareness and emphasize that "political participation is always important and every vote counts" (Dreßler 2025).

Studies that specifically analyze digital game players as an independent group in terms of their political attitudes or voter turnout habits have been rare to date. On top of that, gaming is a mass phenomenon (Wimmer 2013), and the widespread use of games also means that digital game players are not a homogeneous social group with uniform views, but are just as diverse as the general population. Political attitudes among "gamers" can therefore be just as diverse as those of the general population.

Of Germans aged 16 and over, 53% play video or computer games at least occasionally (Bitkom 2024). In its 2024 annual report, the industry association game e.V. estimated that around 59% of Germans play games in various forms (game e.V. 2025). In contrast, this survey reveals an even higher proportion of digital game players: 67% of respondents play digital games in one form or another, and among young people aged 16-34, the figure is as high as 86%. This means that the group of digital game players largely overlaps with the total sample. For this reason, political trends among young people can also be assumed to have a formative influence on young players.

FIGURE 6 View of democracy in Germany

Has the state of democracy in Germany changed in recent years?



Due to rounding, percentages do not always add up to 100. Basis: all respondents; weighted results.

Source: own depiction.

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3.2 How do gaming communities view Germany and democracy?

This survey first took a closer look at trust in democracy as a form of government. This revealed very different political cultures among players. Quantitative data also confirms that digital game players are not a homogeneous group. However, their attitudes are strongly correlated with the intensity and nature of their gaming habits and the gaming cultures in which they are embedded. It is worthwhile for politicians, civil society and the media to take this heterogeneity into account in order to make the most of the potential for democratic participation of digital game players.

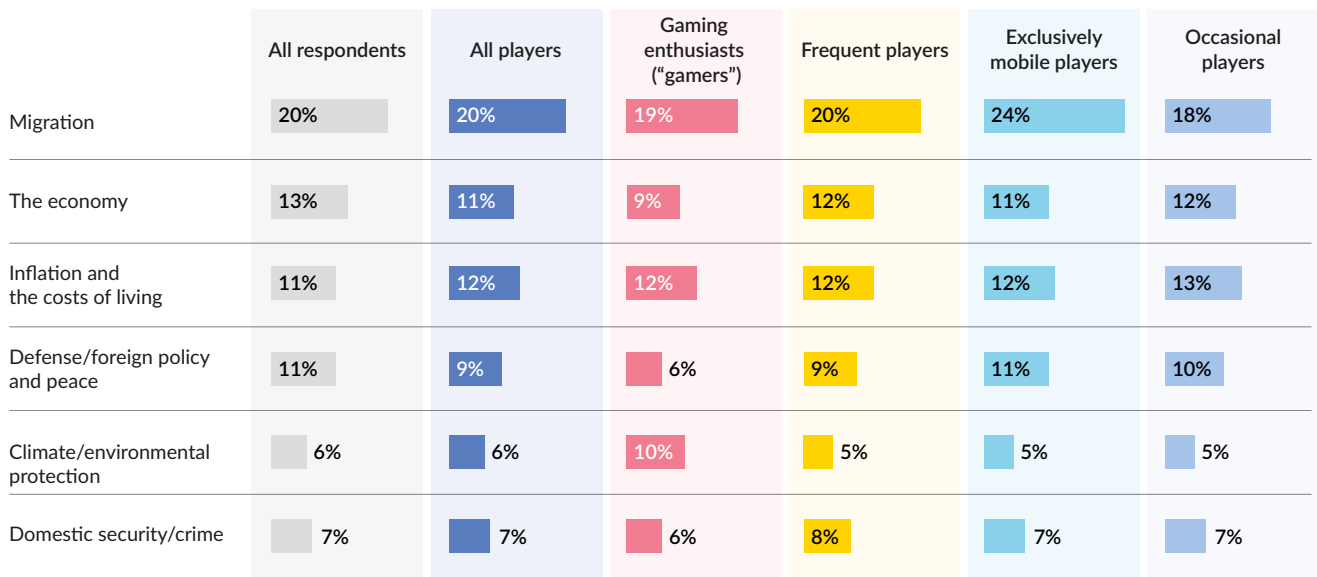
In overall terms, the survey was dominated by a sense of pessimism: 66% of all respondents (and 67% of all players) say that things in Germany are generally heading in the wrong direction. In other words, the social climate is basically characterized by skepticism. In contrast, the predominantly young group of enthusiasts is significantly more optimistic about the country's current development: 43% believe that Germany is developing positively – significantly more than in the total sample (26%) and more than twice as many as among exclusively mobile players (19%) and occasional players (20%). These two groups are particularly skeptical about Germany's future.

The answers to the question of whether the state of democracy has improved or worsened in recent years paint a similar picture (see Figure 6). Here, too, the respondents' pessimistic view of Germany dominates, with 65% of all respondents (and 63% of all players) saying that Germany's democracy has worsened. In particular, occasional and exclusively mobile players (both 70%) view the developments of recent years in a particularly critical light. However, this is not the case for the group of enthusiasts, as only a bit under half (46%) view the development of Germany's democracy negatively, while 34% view it positively. This positive assessment is shared by only 9% of all respondents and 12% of all players.

This illustrates something worth noting: Enthusiasts – a relatively young, digitally savvy group involved in gaming cultures – have a much more positive view of Germany's overall development and the state of its democracy than the average population and all other subgroups. Additional studies should examine the factors contributing to this relatively optimistic outlook in order to make these positive attitudes useful in practice.

FIGURE 7 Most important political issue

Please indicate which of the following issues you consider to be the most important and the second most important issue that the next federal government should focus on more strongly.



The other possible choices were: education; pensions; rent and housing; jobs and wages; transportation and infrastructure; social justice; health policy; family policy; social cohesion; extremism and polarization; women's rights and gender equality; digitalization; racism and discrimination; LGBTQ+ rights and tolerance; other/none of these issues. The top 5 categories in each subgroup are depicted. Since multiple answers (at most 2) were possible, the percentages do not add up to 100. Basis: all respondents; weighted results.

Source: own depiction.

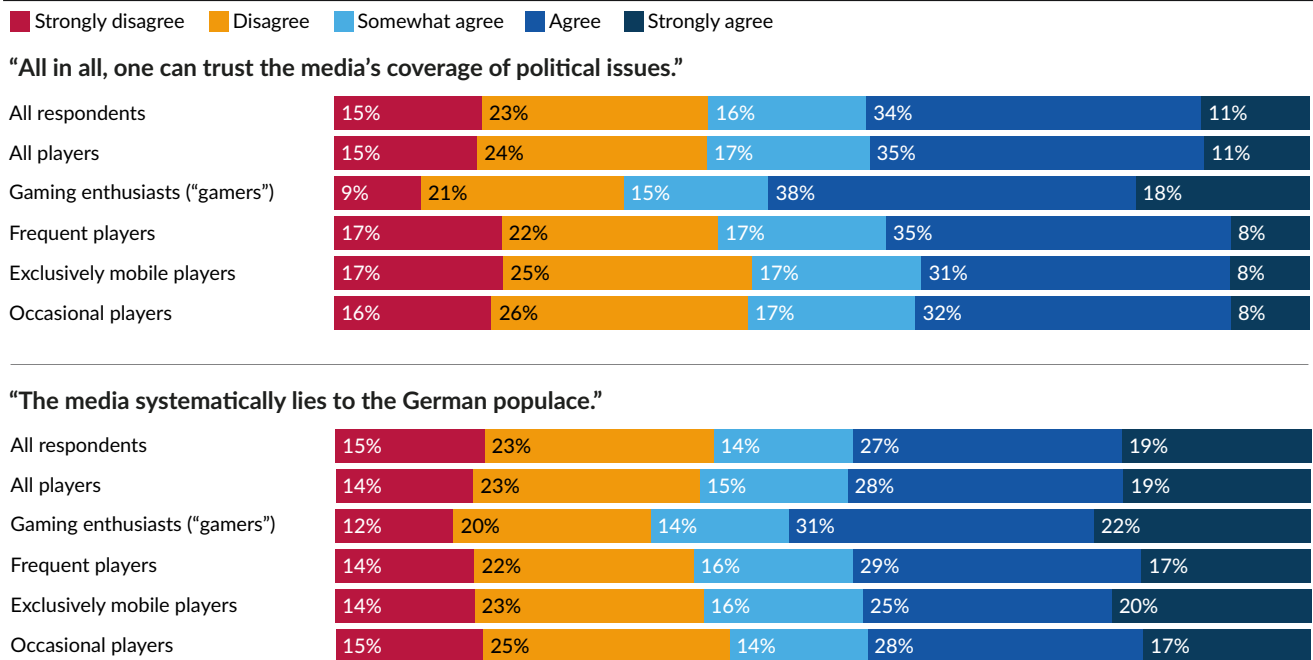
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3.3 Most important political issues

There are major similarities among all respondent groups when it comes to the question of “the most important issue that the next federal government should focus on more strongly.” Similar to the total sample, migration is the dominant political issue for all player types. Between 18% (occasional players) and 24% (Exclusively mobile players) say that migration is the top issue. But there are also major concerns about the economy. In fact, inflation and the economy rank among the top three issues for all groups – and therefore connect them – followed by concerns about security, as “defense/foreign policy and peace” as well as “domestic security/crime” consistently occupy fourth and fifth place (see Figure 7).

In this case, the only group that differs from the other groups – though only slightly – is that of the enthusiasts, for whom “climate and environmental protection” (10%) is the only non-economic issue among the top five. This could possibly result from the lower average age and more diverse agenda of this group, but it could alternatively indicate their greater concern about political decisions that will have consequences in the distant future.

FIGURE 8a Trust in the media



Missing value: don't know. The original 11-point scale was condensed into a 5-point scale:
 Ratings 0 to 1 mean "strongly disagree," 2 to 4 mean "disagree," 6 to 8 mean "agree," and 9 to 10 mean "strongly agree."
 Due to rounding, percentages do not always add up to 100. Basis: all respondents; weighted results.

Source: own depiction.

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3.4 Trust in the media, democracy and institutions

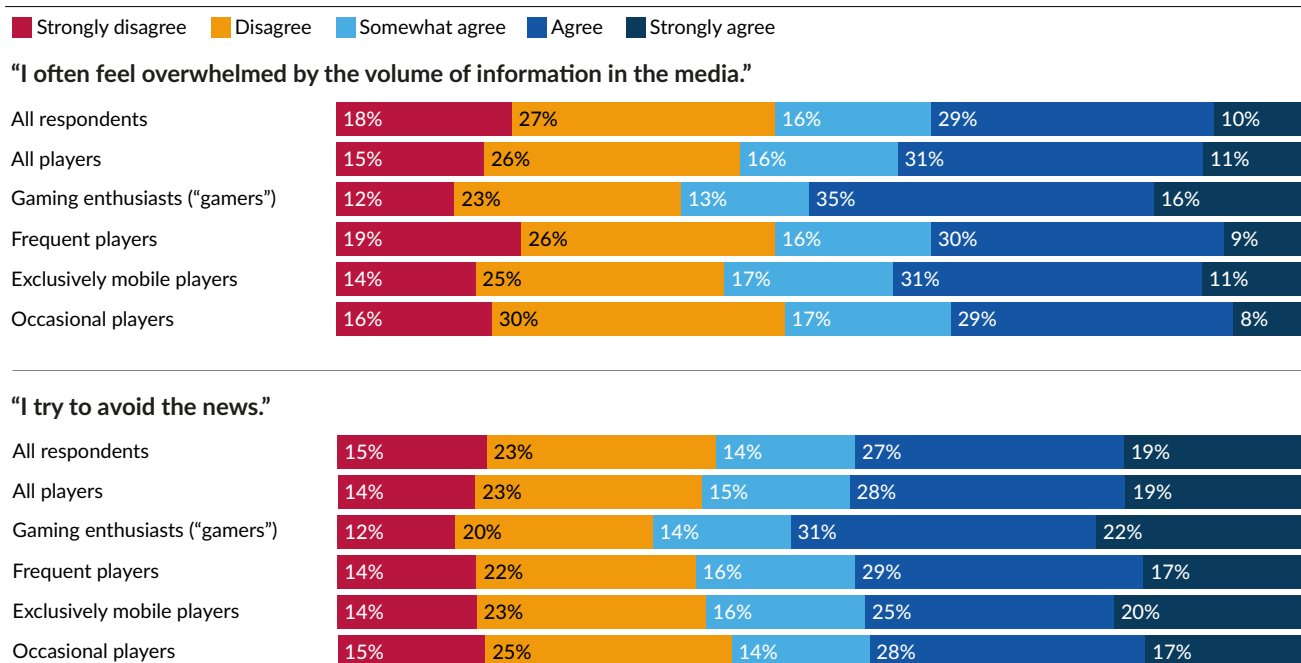
When it comes to **trust in the media**, an ambivalent picture emerges in all groups, although they all tend to be skeptical of traditional news sources. This ambivalence is particularly pronounced among the enthusiasts.

For example, 45% of all respondents and of all players say they trust media coverage of political issues (see Figure 8a). Interestingly, the figure is 10% higher among enthusiasts: 56% of them say they trust political reporting in the media – the highest figure among all respondent groups. At the same time, 53% of them agree to varying degrees with the statement that the media systematically lies to the German populace. This figure is also above average and ranks first among all subgroups, whereas 46% of all respondents – and 47% of all players – still believe that the German media systematically lies – an overall level of mistrust that is alarmingly high. There is also a strong feeling among enthusiasts that they are often overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information in the media, with 51% agreeing with this statement (see Figure 8b). This seems to lead to a deliberate avoidance of news, as

no other group of respondents reports intentionally avoiding news as frequently as the enthusiasts: 53% of them do so somewhat or completely, compared to 46% of all respondents and 47% of all players.

The ambivalence that is particularly evident among enthusiasts seems to be less a contradiction than an expression of a specific pattern. Like the other types of players, they are overwhelmingly in favor of democracy as a form of government (76% of enthusiasts consider democracy to be the best form of government), but they are more distrustful of (traditional) media sources than the other groups. One consequence of this may be found in their extensive use of almost all common social media platforms, which is not found in this form in any of the other groups of respondents (see Appendix A1 on platform usage) – in other words, the enthusiasts also turn to alternative sources of information. However, this group reacts more strongly than the others to this increased pressure to stay informed, either by selectively receiving information or even (consciously) disengaging from it. While other groups of players are more similar to the average population,

FIGURE 8b Trust in the media



Missing value: don't know. The original 11-point scale was condensed into a 5-point scale:
 Ratings 0 to 1 mean "strongly disagree," 2 to 4 mean "disagree," 6 to 8 mean "agree," and 9 to 10 mean "strongly agree."
 Due to rounding, percentages do not always add up to 100. Basis: all respondents; weighted results.

Source: own depiction.

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enthusiasts are very information-savvy, but also more critical and distanced users of information. This can be described as fragmented media trust in an information environment that is overwrought in many places.

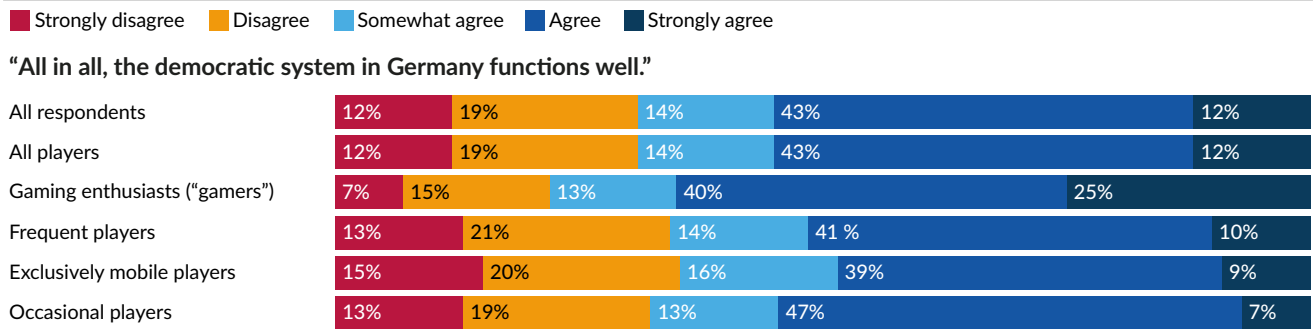
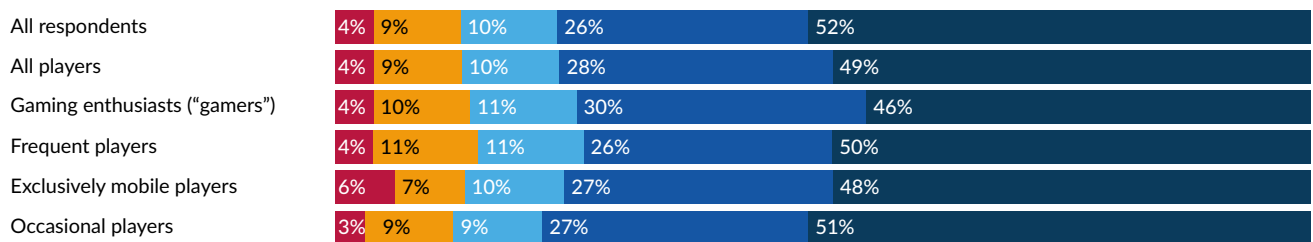
However, this ambivalence about the media does not affect the general understanding of democracy among enthusiasts. In fact, enthusiasts were more likely than the average to respond that Germany's democratic system of government functions well: 65% agree with the statement that the democratic system in Germany works well on the whole, compared to 55% of the total population and 55% of all players (see Figure 9a). Enthusiasts also have a more positive view of the future viability of political decision-making than the average: 53% believe Germany's political system is capable of tackling tomorrow's challenges (vs. 42% for the total population and 41% for all players; see Figure 9b).

Given these findings, it can be assumed that enthusiasm for democracy does not arise through traditional media channels, but rather stabilizes through other spheres of experience and communication. This may reflect an output-oriented understanding of democracy based on past experiences of efficiency and the capacity to act. Trust in democracy and institutions

therefore exists despite, not because of, the general trust in the media – a finding that poses new challenges for political communication and education. Anyone who wants to reach young, digitally socialized groups like gaming enthusiasts must understand their information logic and communication contexts – and take them seriously.

When it comes to trust in institutions, there are significant similarities between the total sample and most types of players. The police (55%) and academia/science (55–56%) enjoy the highest levels of trust, while political parties (11–12%), social media (8–11%) and influencers (6–8%) enjoy the lowest levels of trust. Here again, the group of enthusiasts has a different perspective, as it is characterized by an overall higher degree of trust in key social institutions, particularly political parties, academia/science and public broadcasters (see Figure 10). In keeping with their high level of digital savviness, they also have much higher levels of trust in social media and influencers. This pattern of trust differs significantly from the rather skeptical and distant attitude of many other groups of players (e.g., exclusively mobile players and frequent players; see Figure A2 in the Appendix, which supplements Figure 10).

FIGURE 9a Trust in democracy and politics

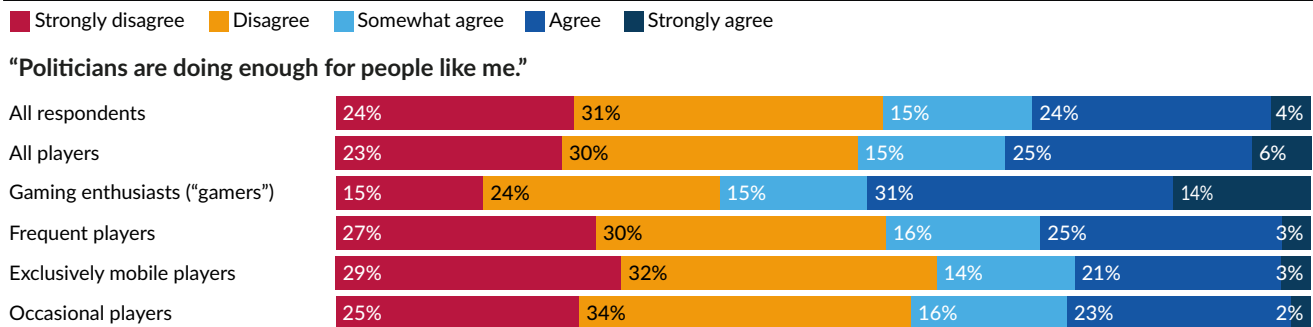
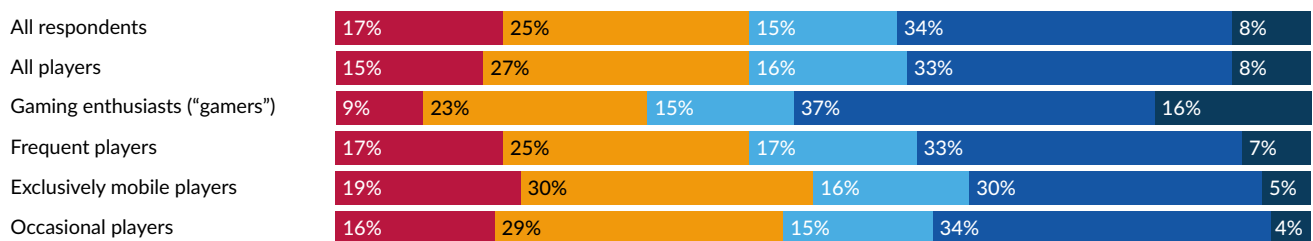
**"Democracy is the best form of government."**

Missing value: don't know. The original 11-point scale was condensed into a 5-point scale:
 Ratings 0 to 1 mean "strongly disagree," 2 to 4 mean "disagree," 6 to 8 mean "agree," and 9 to 10 mean "strongly agree."
 Due to rounding, percentages do not always add up to 100. Basis: all respondents; weighted results.

Source: own depiction.

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FIGURE 9b Trust in democracy and politics

**"Germany's political system is capable of tackling tomorrow's challenges."**

Missing value: don't know. The original 11-point scale was condensed into a 5-point scale:
 Ratings 0 to 1 mean "strongly disagree," 2 to 4 mean "disagree," 6 to 8 mean "agree," and 9 to 10 mean "strongly agree."
 Due to rounding, percentages do not always add up to 100. Basis: all respondents; weighted results.

Source: own depiction.

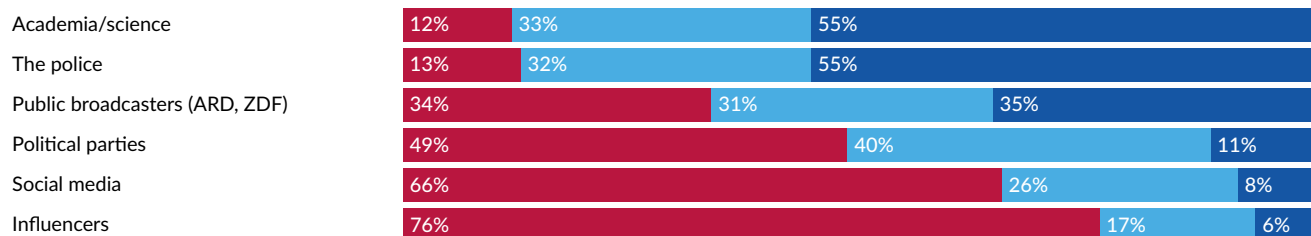
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FIGURE 10 Trust in institutions – enthusiasts vs. all respondents

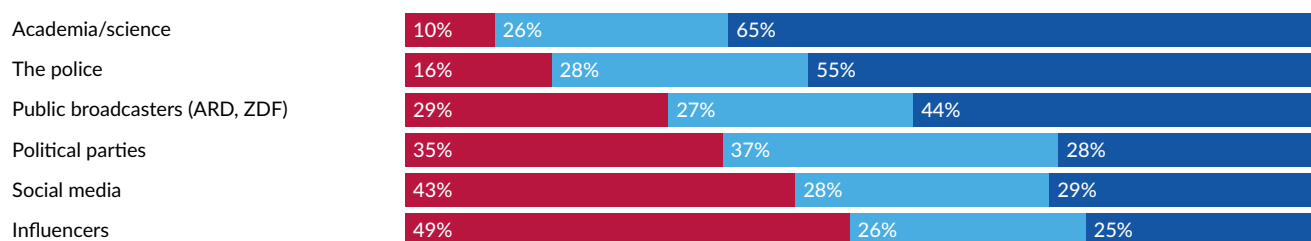
Please indicate how much confidence you have in the following.

■ Little or no confidence ■ Some confidence ■ (Very) much confidence

All respondents



Gaming enthusiasts ("gamers")



Missing value: don't know. Due to rounding, percentages do not always add up to 100. Basis: all respondents; weighted results.

Source: own depiction.

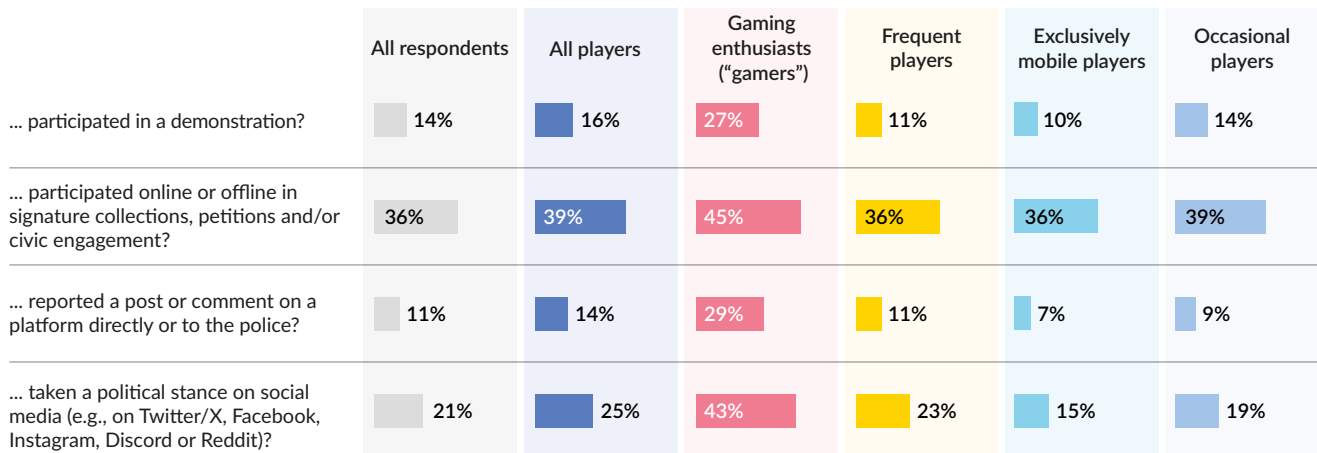
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While the level of trust of the overall group of players is very close to the average of the general population, the group of enthusiasts in particular presents a complex overall picture, as they are distinguished by a highly digitalized and nuanced positive trust profile. Rather than being alienated from the media, they are critical and selective users of information with a high

degree of trust in democracy and institutions – as long as they are perceived as being effective. This poses a twofold challenge for political education and efforts to promote democracy, as they must be able to form connections with digital spheres of experience and build trust not only through their substance, but also through tangible political relevance.

FIGURE 11 Social engagement

There are various ways to get involved. In the last 12 months, have you ...?



Missing values: no, no response. Basis: all respondents; weighted results.

Source: own depiction.

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3.5 Political engagement of players

When it comes to political participation, there are significant differences between the various groups of players. Particularly striking is the high level of civic engagement among the gaming enthusiasts. Of this group, 27% said that they had participated in a demonstration in the past 12 months, which is significantly higher than the average for all players (16%) and non-players (10%; see Figure 11). Even when it comes to forms of participation (e.g., petitions, signature collections and civic participation processes), enthusiasts show a much higher rate of participation (45%) than the overall average of all players (39%).

A similar picture emerges for other forms of political engagement. According to their own statements, 29% of enthusiasts have already reported posts or comments with problematic content on platforms or to the police. While this figure is 14% among all players, it is only 9% among non-players. The difference is particularly pronounced when it comes to political statements on social media: 43% of enthusiasts say they have expressed political views on platforms such as Discord, Reddit or Twitter in the last 12 months, which is well above the overall average of all players (25%).

In contrast, exclusively mobile players tend to be more politically passive. Only 10% of this group took part in demonstrations, 36% supported petitions or citizens' initiatives, only 7% reported problematic posts, and only 15% said that they had expressed political views on social media. Frequent players, on the other hand, are very similar to the total sample in terms of their political engagement, as their affirmative answers to the corresponding questions were in the median range of the comparison groups.

The high level of digital savviness among enthusiasts, which is also due to the relatively young age and high level of political interest of this group's members, is positively correlated with greater civic engagement. In addition to being more civically active than the average player, gaming enthusiasts use both traditional and digital forms of political expression to make their voices heard.

4 | Group-focused enmity and societal integration

Previous research on gaming communities connected with debates about violent video games and Gamer-gate has focused on socially problematic attitudes in largely unregulated digital spaces. Gaming communities are often associated with various forms of group-focused enmity, ranging from antisemitism to sexism. Research in this field has intensified since the 2019 far-right attack on a synagogue in Halle, which left two dead and two injured. Nevertheless, there are still many gaps in our knowledge, and public debates about “gamers” are often characterized by stereotypes and prejudices.

One of the supposedly less dangerous prejudices about gamers is that they are lonely as a result of having poor social skills. In fact, internet culture has multiple terms and phenomena to describe this, ranging from “incels” (see, e.g., Kracher 2020) to the “male loneliness epidemic,” which has its own TikTok trends and Reddit threads despite a lack of scientific evidence for it in the German-speaking world.

4.1 Group-focused enmity: antisemitism, racism, sexism and queerphobia

In the context of this study, antisemitic attitudes are understood as a combination of stereotypical and derogatory beliefs and tropes that express hostility toward Jews. A distinction can be made between classic antisemitism (e.g., “Jews have too much influence in the world”), secondary antisemitism (e.g., “It is wrong to blame Germans today for the crimes committed against Jews during the Nazi era”), and Israel-related antisemitism (e.g., “Israel’s policies have been causing me to increasingly dislike Jews”) (Vopel and Schulz 2025).

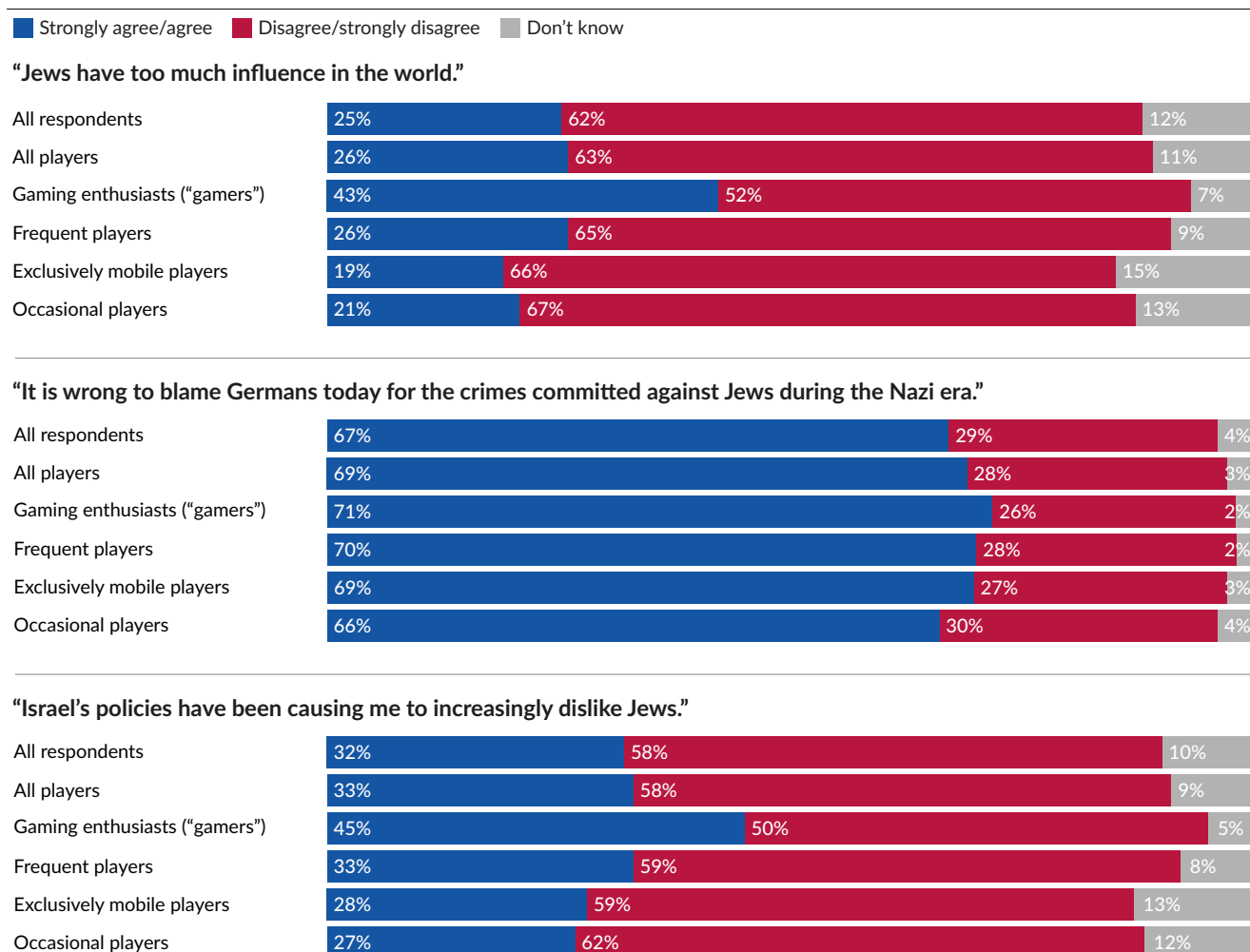
When combined into a single indicator, these items reveal a striking pattern: The group of enthusiasts displays a significantly higher level of antisemitism than the other groups of players as well as non-players (see Figure 12). They agree much more often with the statement that Jews have too much influence (43% vs. 25% for the entire sample). The high level of agreement with this statement among this group is likely to be closely linked to its demographic composition. For example, the Bertelsmann Stiftung’s latest study on Israel finds that young men under the age of 40 have

the highest rate of agreement with this statement (36%) and identifies both an age and gender effect (Vopel and Schulz 2025: 11). However, there is hardly any gender-related difference among enthusiasts (42% of women and 43% of men).

A similar picture emerges with regard to both secondary and Israel-related antisemitism, as gaming enthusiasts show higher levels of agreement with the related statements than the other groups.

Sexism and anti-feminism were measured using a proven set of items from the Mitte Study (Zick et al. 2023) and the Leipzig Authoritarianism Study (Decker et al. 2024). In these studies, sexism refers to the perpetuation and reproduction of traditional gender roles (e.g., “Women should concentrate more on their role as wives and mothers again”), which also involves the elevation of men and the subordination or devaluation of women. Antifeminism also refers to political resistance to gender equality and a movement against feminist emancipation efforts (Kalkstein et al. 2024).

FIGURE 12 Antisemitic attitudes



Due to rounding, percentages do not always add up to 100. Basis: all respondents; weighted results.

Source: own depiction.

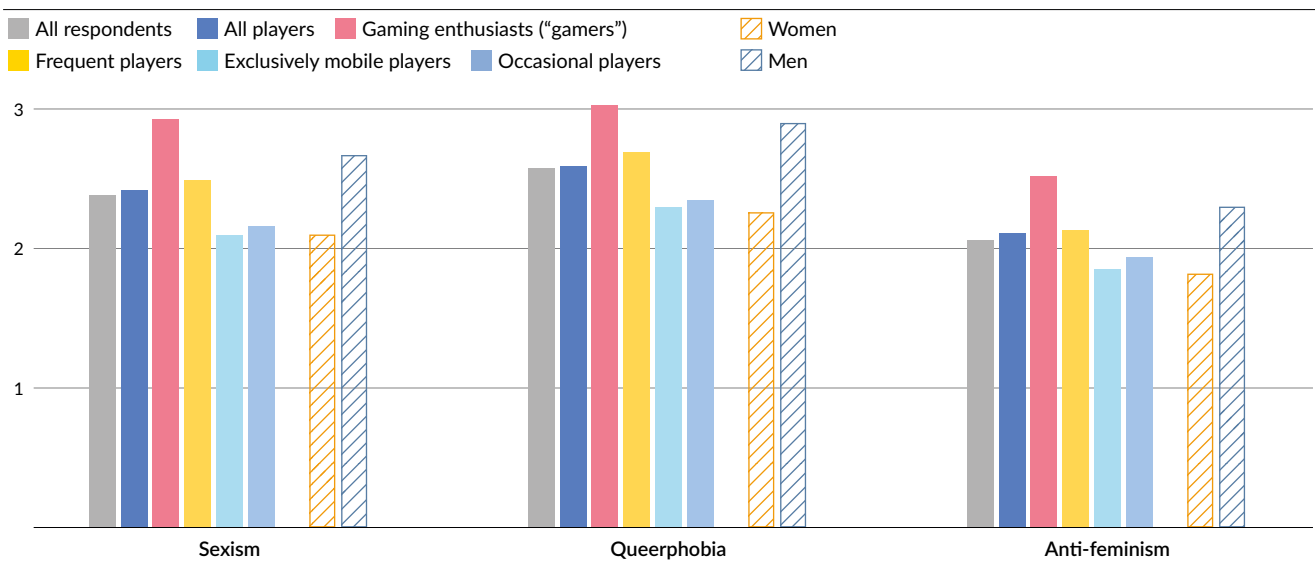
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Anti-feminism is measured using three items from the Leipzig Authoritarianism Study (e.g., "Women in politics often make themselves look ridiculous"). Both in terms of sexism and anti-feminism, gaming enthusiasts score significantly higher on the scale than both the overall sample and the other types of players. According to the Mitte Study, exclusively mobile players stand out with the lowest score (2.1) on the sexism scale, while the total sample has a mean score of 2.38 and gaming enthusiasts have an average score of 2.93, with a higher score indicating a higher rate of agreement with the sexism-related items (see Figure 13). This difference could be due to the composition of the groups. While the highest levels of sexism are found among young men under the age of 35, the scores for

women are generally lower. For example, more than one in three men (37%) under the age of 35 agree that women should concentrate more on their role as wives and mothers, but this opinion is only held by one in six women (16%).

Comparable observations can be made with regard to anti-feminism. Of the gaming enthusiasts, 39% agree with the statement that women in politics often make themselves look ridiculous – which is twice as high as the share of overall group of respondents. Here, too, it can be observed that men exhibit much higher scores (2.3 vs. 1.82 for women), with young men in particular agreeing with anti-feminist statements at a strikingly high rate.

FIGURE 13 Sexism, anti-feminism and queerphobia



The **Sexism Index**, based on the Mitte Study, was calculated using four items by adding the values of the four items together and then averaging them. The **Queerphobia Index** was calculated using the first two sexism items by adding the values of the two items together and then averaging them. Missing values for individual items were replaced with the average values of all respondents for that item. In order to achieve comparability with the Mitte Study, the original 11-point scale was recoded to a 5-point scale. The **Anti-feminism Index**, based on the Leipzig Authoritarianism Study, was calculated using three items by adding the values of the three items together and then averaging them. Missing values for individual items were replaced with the average values of all respondents for that item. In order to achieve comparability with the Leipzig Authoritarianism Study, the original 11-point scale was recoded to a 5-point scale. However, since not all items from the Leipzig Authoritarianism Study were included in the survey, comparisons are only possible to a limited extent. Basis: all respondents; weighted results.

Source: own depiction.

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Queerphobia was measured using the (hetero)sexism scale, which asks about negative or disparaging attitudes toward homosexual and transgender individuals ("It's disgusting when homosexuals kiss in public" and "I think it's silly when a man wants to be a woman or a woman wants to be a man"; Mokros & Zick 2023: 158). Here, too, the highest rates of agreement are found among gaming enthusiasts – and there is once again a correlation with gender, as almost half of men (42%) and half of gaming enthusiasts (49%) agree with the transphobic statement that it is silly for a man to want to be a woman or vice versa. On average, only one in three people (33%) tends to do so, with the figure being closer to one in four among women (24%) and those who play exclusively on mobile devices (27%).

It is only when it comes to racism – meaning the rejection of people who are racialized as "foreigners" with a "different origin" (regardless of their actual origin) – that there are hardly any differences among the various player types. In this case, it is rather educational attainment level and voting behavior that are correlated with agreement with racist statements.

Respondents with high educational attainment levels as well as those who vote for the center-left Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Greens and the far-left Left Party show the lowest agreement rates, in contrast voters for the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party.

All the categories of group-focused enmity discussed above show a correlation with voting decisions. While AfD voters have higher rates of agreement with the statements in all categories, voters for the Left Party and the Greens show significantly less group-focused enmity.

Here, it is important to emphasize that this study does not allow us to conclude that gaming per se is the cause of antisemitic, sexist or queerphobic attitudes. However, certain subgroups – especially enthusiasts – show significantly higher rates of agreement with statements about group-focused enmity. The decisive factor here is likely to be less gaming itself than the digital environments and social contexts the players inhabit.

Enthusiasts spend an above-average amount of time in interactive online spaces, which can be characterized by high communication density, weak social regulation and, in some cases, problematic discourse cultures. In these spaces, community structures emerge that can have both an integrative and an exclusionary effect, depending on which actors, narratives and cultural codes are dominant. Attitudes reflecting group-focused enmity are therefore not caused by gaming, but

they can be reinforced in certain digital subcultures that also exist around games – such as those where problematic influencers, subcultures or echo chambers arise. The exact dynamics that lead to these forms of group-focused enmity, which are particularly prevalent among enthusiasts (but also among men and AfD voters) need to be investigated further. A more in-depth qualitative analysis of these environments would be a useful next step.

4.2 Loneliness as a factor relevant to democracy

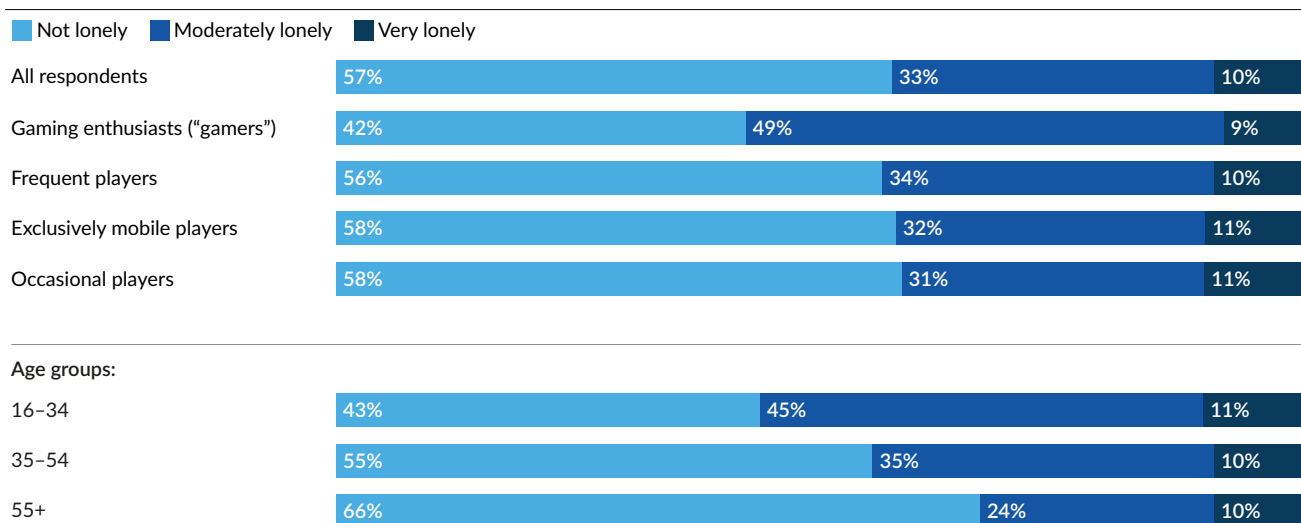
Group-focused enmity can be interpreted as an expression of deep-seated skepticism toward democracy as well as of authoritarian tendencies. When disparaging attitudes toward certain societal groups become normalized, this undermines not only social cohesion but also fundamental principles of democratic culture, such as equality, participation and pluralism. But such attitudes do not arise in a vacuum. Rather, they point to complex social processes in which social isolation, a lack of recognition, and alienation play a key role. It is therefore worth taking a closer look at the phenomenon of loneliness, which since the COVID-19 pandemic can no longer be seen as primarily affecting the elderly.

Young people have been the loneliest age group in the post-pandemic era, with almost half of 16- to 30-year-olds feeling lonely (Steinmayr et al. 2024). Loneliness refers to the unpleasant, painful feeling that arises when people perceive the quantity and quality of their social contacts and relationships as insufficient (Luhmann 2022; Peplau and Perlman 1982). However, loneliness is not only an individual feeling of suffering, but also a challenge to democracy. People who frequently feel lonely, disconnected and misunderstood are more likely to believe conspiracy theories, condone political violence and agree with authoritarian attitudes (Neu et al. 2023). In addition, lonely people report lower political self-efficacy and lower satisfaction with democracy as a form of government (Heinz 2025).

This survey also shows that loneliness is a problem that is strongly correlated with age. Of those aged 16–34, 56% are at least moderately lonely and 11% are very lonely (see Figure 14). A comparison with other studies that also used the loneliness scale developed by de Jong Gierveld and van Tilburg (2006) shows an even higher prevalence of loneliness among young people in Germany (46% in Steinmayr et al. 2024; 51% in Luhmann et al. 2024). The rate found in this study is therefore close to the European average (57%, according to Luhmann et al. 2024). The proportion of severely lonely young people in Germany – at between 10% and 12% – appears to be stable across the different surveys. The 55+ age group shows the lowest level of loneliness (34%).

There are hardly any differences between the various types of digital game players, as frequent players, occasional players, and players who exclusively play on mobile devices are all affected by loneliness to a similarly high degree (around 43%). The only group that stands out is enthusiasts; more than half of them (58%) feel lonely, although only 9% of this group can be classified as severely lonely, with almost a majority (49%) reporting moderate loneliness. Since severe loneliness – especially when it becomes chronic – poses many risks to mental and physical health (Steinmayr et al. 2024), the increased number of lonely people among enthusiasts is a warning sign. However, due to the relatively small share of severely lonely people, it should not be overinterpreted.

FIGURE 14 Loneliness



Due to rounding, percentages do not always add up to 100. For the calculation of loneliness, strong and weak agreement for the items on emotional loneliness and strong and weak rejection for the items on social loneliness were counted (de Jong Gierveld and Kamphuis 1985; Diehl et al. 2018). The result was a value of 0 or 1 per statement. Based on the answers, three groups were distinguished: "not lonely" (0-1), "moderately lonely" (2-4), and "severely lonely" (5-6). Basis: all respondents; weighted results.

Source: own depiction.

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According to this survey, loneliness decreases along with higher educational attainment. However, the gender-related effects revealed in other studies, according to which women are more affected by loneliness than men, are not evident in this study's sample. Rather than affinity with the group of enthusiasts, the decisive factors for loneliness in this survey are the age and educational attainment level of respondents. This suggests that gaming-specific factors alone do not provide a sufficient explanation for higher rates of loneliness.

Loneliness has been and continues to be a problem for young people. Even though the stereotype of the "lonely gamer" is widespread (see the section 5.5.2 on prejudices against gaming in the next chapter), this survey did not find any strong correlations between loneliness and gaming. Instead, particularly during difficult phases, gaming can offer young people – the age group particularly affected by loneliness – opportunities to form and nurture social connections. Many people find friends through gaming or feel understood and included in online communities (see the section "Gaming communities as social anchoring points for young people" in the following chapter).

5 | Games as a political medium? Society, politics and identity

5.1 The political nature of games

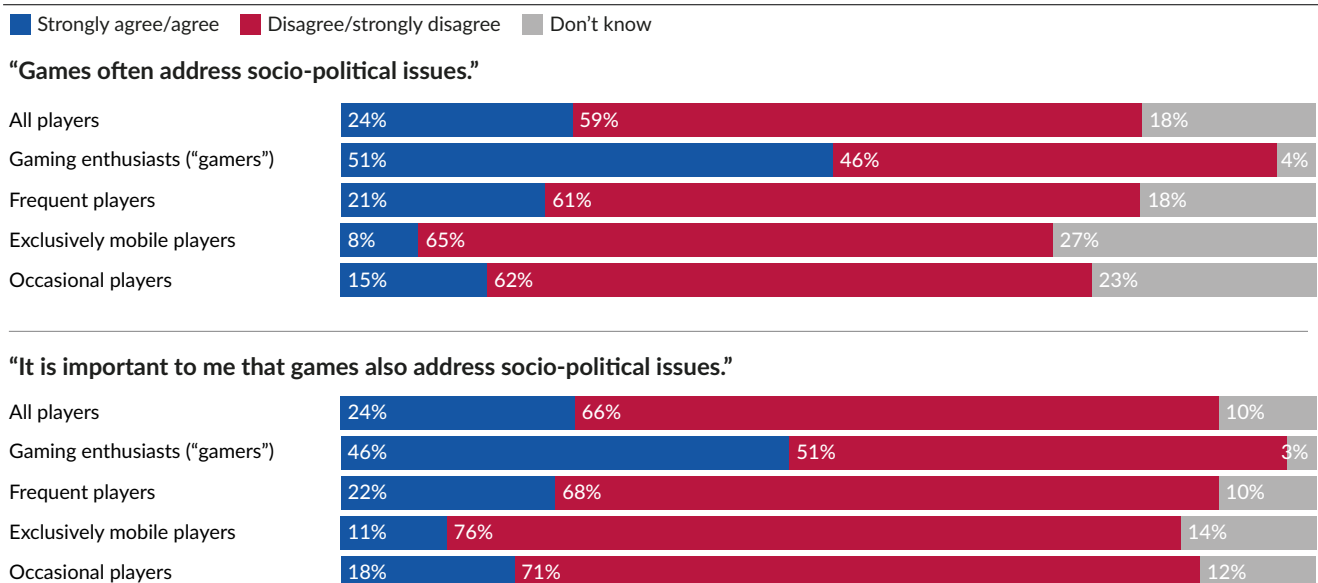
The question of whether digital games are a political medium has been around since their earliest days – and the issue has long been settled in academia (Pfister 2018). Games *are* political, just as all media are political. However, as the survey data show, this classification is controversial when it comes to public perceptions of players.

For example, 8% of exclusively mobile players, 15% of occasional players, and 21% of frequent players agree with the statement that video games often address socio-political issues, which allows interesting conclusions to be drawn about the games played by each type of player (see Figure 15 as well as Table A2 in the Appendix). In fact, 11% of exclusively mobile players, 18% of occasional players, and 22% of frequent players say that games definitely *should* address socio-political issues.

Only minorities of them – 4% of exclusively mobile players, 9% of occasional players, and 13% of frequent players – deliberately choose games with socio-political themes. This overview of the player types already suggests that the closer respondents are to gaming cultures, the more polarized is the image of the socio-political character that games have (or should have) in the view of the respondents.

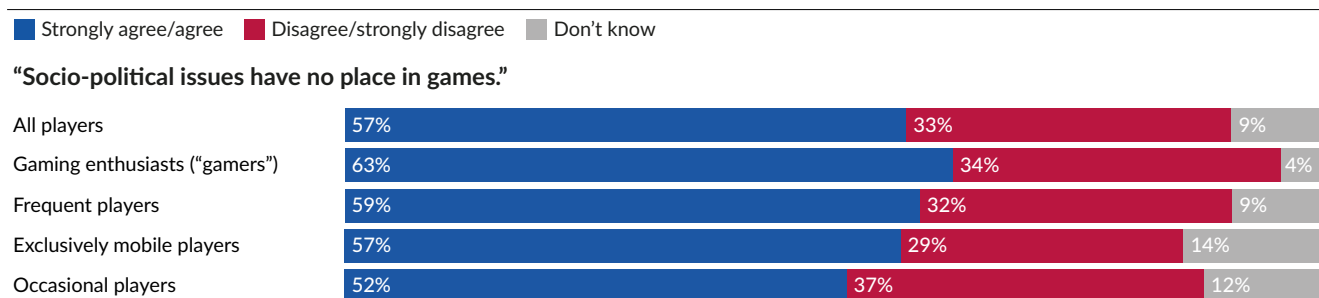
Despite their sometimes highly intensive use of the medium, people who exclusively play games on mobile devices are the least likely to see its socio-political nature. This may also be related to the specific games they play, as 80% of exclusively mobile players mainly play thinking, skill and puzzle games (e.g., Candy Crush or Solitaire), which often have less complex contexts and narratives. At the same time, this genre is the least used by all other types of players.

FIGURE 15 Socio-political issues in games



Due to rounding, percentages do not always add up to 100. Basis: all players; weighted results.

FIGURE 16 Opposition to socio-political issues in games



Due to rounding, percentages do not always add up to 100. Basis: all players; weighted results.

Source: own depiction.

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The socio-political role of games is most strongly perceived among enthusiasts. In fact, just over half (51%) of them agree with the simple statement that games often address socio-political issues – a figure that is more than twice as high as for all other types of players. Of the enthusiasts surveyed, 46% agree with this statement and say that games definitely should address socio-political issues. What's more, the extremely low rate of "don't know" responses among enthusiasts compared to the other player types (only 3% for the statement "It is important to me that games also address socio-political issues" and only 2% for the statement "I deliberately play games with socio-political themes") indicates that this group has strong opinions on the related set of issues. More than a third (40%) of enthusiasts even actively choose games that deal with specific socio-political issues, which represents an agreement rate three times higher than for any other player type. On the other hand, a majority of the enthusiasts surveyed (63%) agree with the statement that socio-political issues have no place in games (agreement: exclusively mobile players 57%, occasional players 52%, frequent players 59%; see Figure 16).

In concrete terms, this means that the closer players are to the medium of games (e.g., because they use it frequently and strongly identify with the associated culture through the label "gamer"), the more aware

they are of the socio-political content of the medium – and the more clearly their attitudes toward it emerge. Enthusiasts demonstrate not only a significantly higher level of awareness of and engagement with the socio-political content of games, but above all a clearly polarized attitude toward it. Indeed, while a proportion of this group actively selects political games and stresses their relevance, a similarly large proportion categorically rejects such themes in games. This range sets enthusiasts apart as a particularly discursively charged subgroup whose intense engagement with the medium leads to polarized attitudes – on both the positive and negative sides.

In addition to the intensity of gaming, the overall higher level of interest in politics within the group of enthusiasts (66% compared to 53% on average among all other player types) is likely to be another explanation for why they, in particular, participate more strongly in the social anchoring of the medium. They do not perceive games as isolated recreational spaces, but as surfaces onto which they can project their political convictions – and they assess and classify games based on the extent to which they play this role. In other words, the socio-political character of games is particularly hotly debated precisely where the medium is most intensively used.

5.2 The role and importance of gaming communities

However, the debate surrounding the political nature of games is not limited to the medium itself, but also extends to the social space offered by gaming communities in all their diversity. These digital networks surrounding games – various platforms (e.g., Twitch, Discord and Reddit) and influencers themselves – have become important venues for political debate and everyday interaction. For many players, they are more than just forums for discussing game strategies or trading technical tips. Rather, they act as social micro-spaces where exchange, recognition, and a sense of belonging are experienced and where friendships are formed and nurtured.

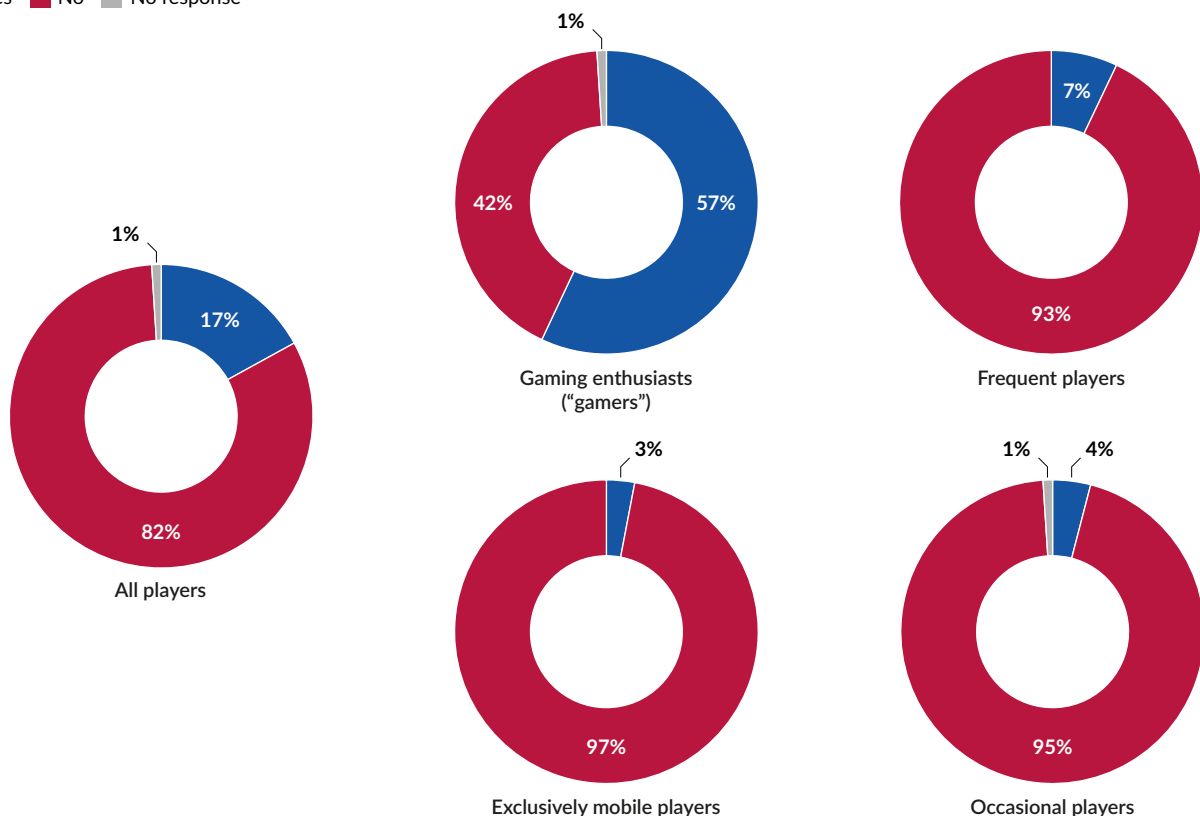
For example, 17% of all players see themselves as part of one or more gaming communities – among enthusiasts, this figure rises to a clear majority of 57% (see Figure 17). At the same time, these spaces seem to have

great social importance, as 87% of community members say they feel understood and supported there, while the figure among enthusiasts is even higher, at 91%. This also shows that this digital interaction is by no means superficial or trivial, but can actually foster very deep interpersonal relationships. Almost a third of all players surveyed (32%) have already made friends through games – a remarkably high number (see Figure 18). For enthusiasts, in particular, gaming communities are places for interpersonal relationships, with more than two-thirds (79%) saying they have already made friends through gaming. In many cases, interpersonal connections and friendships do not remain confined to the digital realm, but are also carried over into the analog world: Two-thirds of enthusiasts (67%) and more than a quarter of all players (27%) have already met up in the analog world with people they first got to know online through gaming.

FIGURE 17 Gaming enthusiasts, in particular, see themselves as part of gaming communities

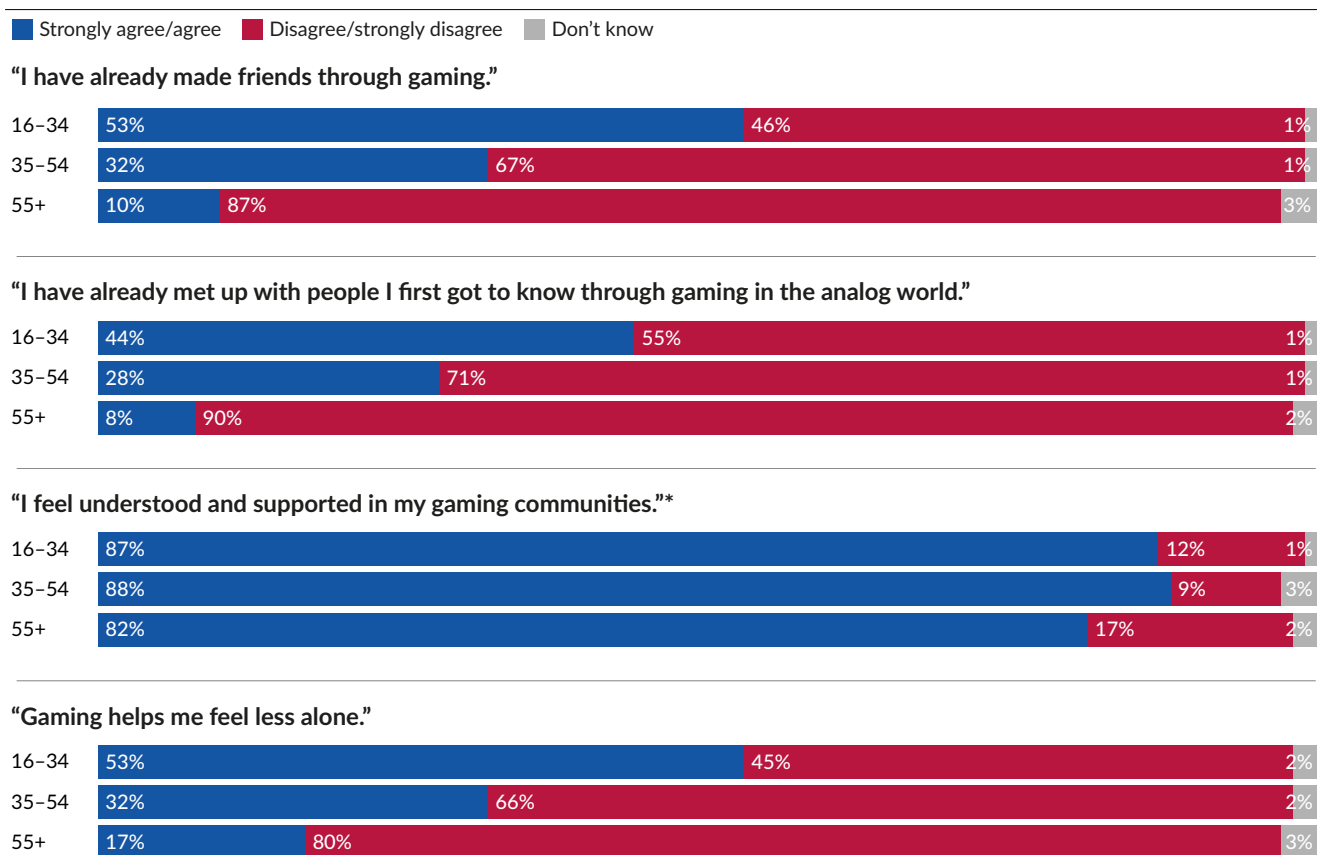
Do you feel like you belong to a gaming community?

■ Yes ■ No ■ No response



Due to rounding, percentages do not always add up to 100. Basis: all players; weighted results.

FIGURE 18 Social aspects of gaming



Due to rounding, percentages do not always add up to 100. Basis: all players; weighted results.

* All players who indicate that they are part of a gaming community.

Source: own depiction.

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5.2.1 Gaming communities as social anchoring points for young people

The hugely important role that gaming communities play for enthusiasts already hints at the fact that gaming communities are socially important, especially for young people. While 43% of all men between the ages of 16 and 34 feel they belong to a gaming community, 20% of women in the same age group feel the same way. Similar to the enthusiasts, this age group (85% of women and 88% of men between the ages of 16 and 34) feels well understood and strongly supported in their gaming communities.

More than half of those under 35 (53%) also say they have made friends through gaming. This is particularly pronounced among young men: While 68% of male players under the age of 35 report such friendships, more than a third (36%) of young women do so.

However, young male respondents are significantly more successful at carrying these friendships over into the analog world: While 28% of young female respondents say they have met up in the real world with people they first got to know through gaming, the figure is almost twice as high (56%) among young male respondents.

Accordingly, more than half of players under the age of 35 (53%) say that gaming – whether playing together with friends or interacting in communities – helps them feel less alone, with 62% of young men and 42% of young women between the ages of 16 and 34 agreeing with this statement. Among enthusiasts, 75% agree with this statement – a figure that is well above the average for all players (35%). Against the backdrop of the social debate on how young people in particular can be better shielded from loneliness and integrated into social contexts (see, e.g., Heinz 2025), these

figures provide important starting points, as they show that gaming communities are not anonymous places, especially for young people. Instead, they can serve as social spaces in which emotional needs are addressed, a sense of community is experienced, and loneliness can be counteracted.

Although it seems obvious that feeling like you belong to one or more gaming communities has a direct impact on feelings of loneliness, this cannot be directly inferred from the available data.

5.2.2 Queer people in gaming communities

Respondents who identify themselves as homosexual or bisexual attach particular significance to gaming communities. When asked whether they feel they belong to a gaming community, above-average rates of homosexual (26%) and bisexual (28%) players agreed with this statement (heterosexual players: 16%). This trend continues when players are asked whether they have already made friends through gaming (homosexual players: 35%; bisexual players: 44%; heterosexual players: 31%) or whether they feel understood and supported in their gaming communities.

Since players are free to choose their communities and this question received high rates of agreement in all subgroups, the absolute agreement on the five-point response scale is particularly meaningful in this case. While 38% of heterosexual players “strongly agree” (and 48% “agree”), bisexual respondents in particular feel understood and supported in their gaming communities, with 50% “strongly agreeing” (and 43% “agreeing”). The reactions to the statement that gaming helps people feel less alone explain why queer people seem to feel particularly well understood in gaming communities. While one third (33%) of all heterosexual players agree with this statement, this item again receives an above-average level of agreement among queer respondents (homosexual people: 51%; bisexual people: 49%).

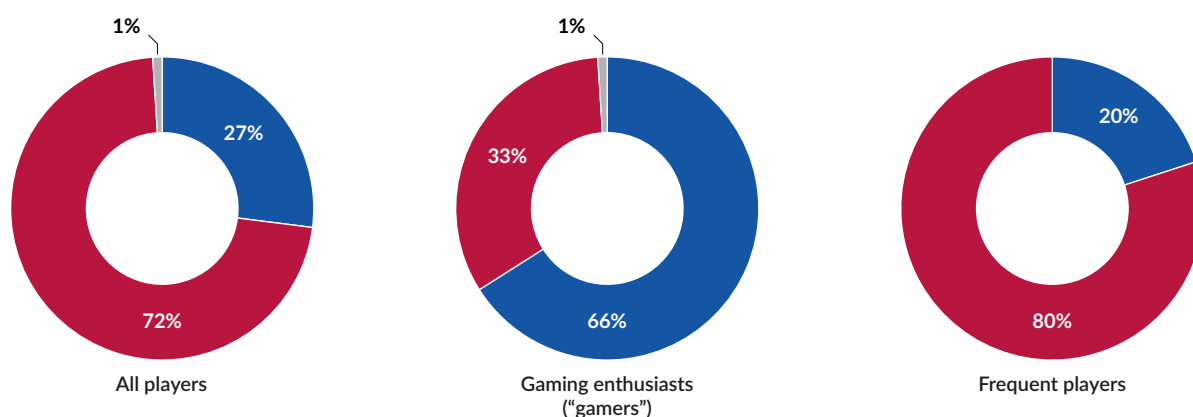
The results suggest that, for queer people, gaming communities can serve as safer spaces in which they can enjoy a sense of belonging, understanding and social support. The above-average agreement rates for statements about friendships and emotional relief among queer respondents also indicate that these digital spaces offer particular potential for empowerment – especially for groups that are more frequently confronted with exclusion or marginalization in their everyday lives.

Although more detailed insights into the subgroups on these matters would be desirable, they had to be omitted owing to the insufficient sample size.

FIGURE 19 Gaming influencers play a greater role for enthusiasts

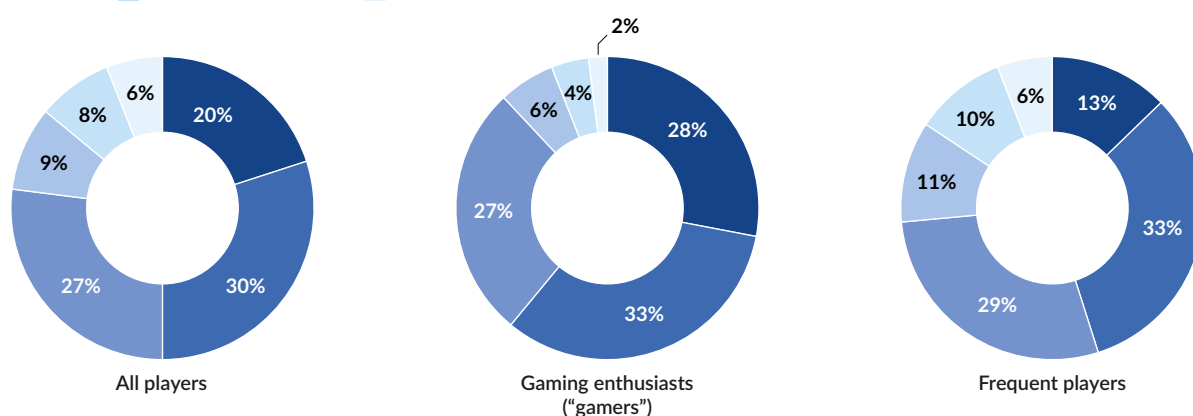
Do you follow individual influencers (Let's Players, streamers, content creators) in the gaming world on platforms like Twitch, YouTube or TikTok?

■ Yes ■ No ■ No response



How often do you follow individual influencers in the gaming world on platforms like Twitch, YouTube or TikTok?

■ Several times a day ■ Daily ■ Several times a week
 ■ Once a week ■ Less than once a week ■ Less than once a month



Due to rounding, percentages do not always add up to 100.

Basis: all players who follow influencers; weighted results; missing value: no response.

Source: own depiction.

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5.3 Socio-political discourse in gaming communities

In summary, given that enthusiasts perceive games as having a particularly strong socio-political dimension and that gaming communities are crucial social spaces for young people, it comes as no surprise that political issues are also present in these communities. For example, just under half of all enthusiasts (49%) state that they “discuss socio-political topics with other gamers,” whether on Twitch, Discord, Reddit or in other contexts. An equal share of them (49%) believe that “influencers in the gaming sector should also address political issues.”

No other type of player shows such high agreement levels and such low disagreement levels in response to these questions.

The figures from the study suggest that gaming influencers play a key role in the social fabric of gaming, as the level of attachment to them is high in some cases. First, it is striking that 27% of all players follow gaming influencers on Twitch, YouTube, TikTok and other platforms (see Figure 19). Enthusiasts, in particular, follow gaming influencers closely: 66% of this respondent group consume content from gaming influencers, 61% do so at least once a day or even several times a

day, and 88% at least several times a week. But even among frequent players, almost half (46%) consume the content of one or more gaming influencers at least daily, and 75% do so several times a week. Even exclusively mobile players, who are in many ways the antithesis of the enthusiast group, consume the content of gaming influencers with remarkable frequency: 42% do so at least once a day and 63% several times a week.

According to this study, gaming – understood as a medium as well as the associated online communities – presents itself not only as a space for individual entertainment and recreational activity, but also as a forum for social interaction and socio-political negotiation processes. These digital spaces are shaped by influencers, who act as links between the community, the media world and socio-political issues, as evidenced by the high levels of influencer content consumed by almost all types of players. The gaming communities that form around them are particularly important for young people and marginalized groups in social terms, as they act as safe digital spaces, facilitate the forma-

tion and cultivation of friendships, and offer emotional support – often far beyond the purely playful aspect.

At the same time, particularly involved groups of players, such as the enthusiasts, demonstrate a keen awareness of the socio-political dimension of the medium, which elicits both approval and condemnation. In gaming communities and via influencers, political discussions are increasingly finding their way into the everyday discourse of these groups. The strong attachment to influencers and their wide reach therefore open up new opportunities – but also challenges – for political communication, as these influencers can effectively address socio-political issues and thereby shape the political socialization of their communities – in both positive and problematic ways. The combination of play, social space and political discourse thus offers great potential for the democratic shaping of digital spaces. At the same time, this will require a deliberate examination of the opportunities and risks of these new forms of public political life.

5.4 The downside of digital spaces: experiences of discrimination

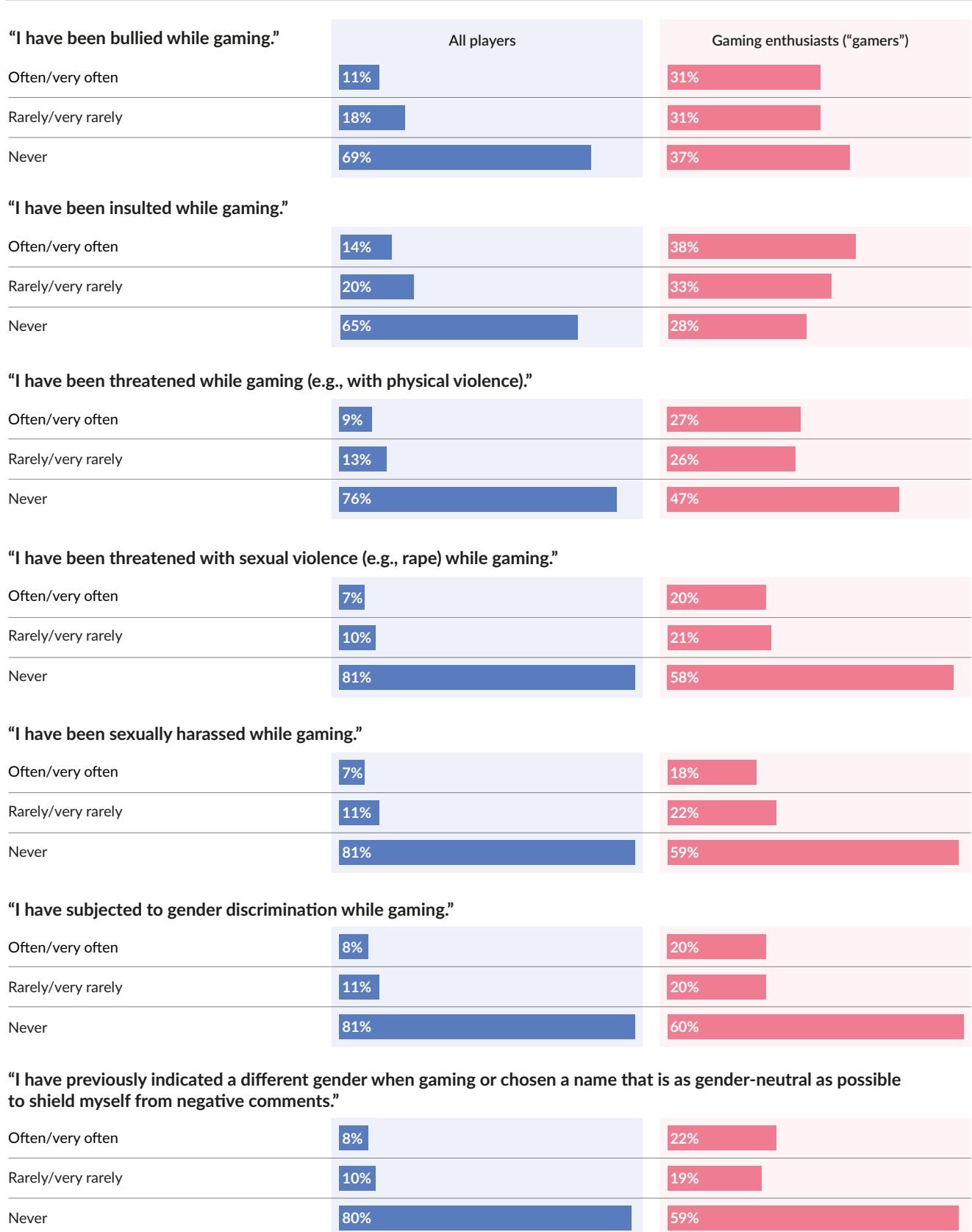
What experiences of violence and hate speech do players encounter in the digital realm? First of all, it should be noted that the vast majority have not yet had any such experiences in gaming environments. While 65% of all players surveyed say they have never been insulted while gaming, 81% of them say they have never experienced discrimination or harassment based on their gender. However, this is primarily due to the fact that most players spend most of their gaming time in a single-player environment and therefore have little to no social interaction while gaming. In fact, 86% of all players play sometimes or exclusively alone. In these cases, gaming remains a rather individual recreational activity associated with positive experiences.

However, the more time players spend in a multiplayer setting and engage in social interaction via games, the more instances of discrimination they experience. For example, experiences of hate speech and bullying play a much greater role among enthusiasts and frequent players, as 71% of enthusiasts report having been insulted at least once and 38% even frequently (see Figure 20). Among frequent players, 30% have been

insulted at least once and 10% experience this frequently. On the other hand, among exclusively mobile players and occasional players, there are no major anomalies regarding experiences of hate speech.

Age and gender significantly influence the experience of hate speech in gaming, as younger people and men report experiencing bullying, insults or threats of violence significantly more often. For example, around 30% of 16- to 34-year-olds regularly experience insults while gaming, but only 1% of those over 55 do. Men are disproportionately affected by general forms of hate speech, such as insults and threats. However, the high proportion of men among gaming enthusiasts (75%) only partially explains these patterns. In fact, when age, gender and enthusiasm are considered together, an additional gender-related effect becomes apparent. This may be related to greater exposure in multiplayer settings, as men play online in such settings (with friends or strangers) almost twice as often as female respondents do. Nevertheless, additional possible explanations for this should be examined.

FIGURE 20 Hate speech in the gaming world

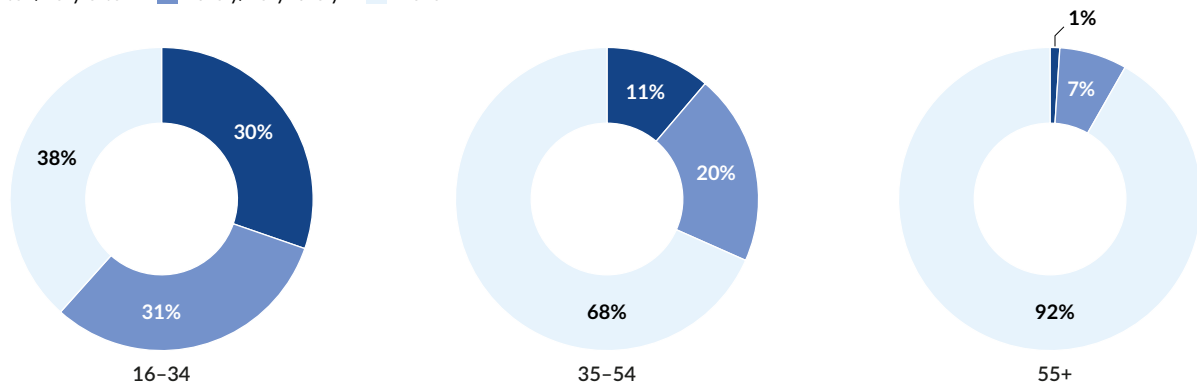


Due to rounding, percentages do not always add up to 100. Basis: all players; weighted results.

FIGURE 21 Insults in gaming by age group

"I have been insulted while gaming."

■ Often/very often ■ Rarely/very rarely ■ Never



Due to rounding, percentages do not always add up to 100. Basis: all players; weighted results.

Source: own depiction.

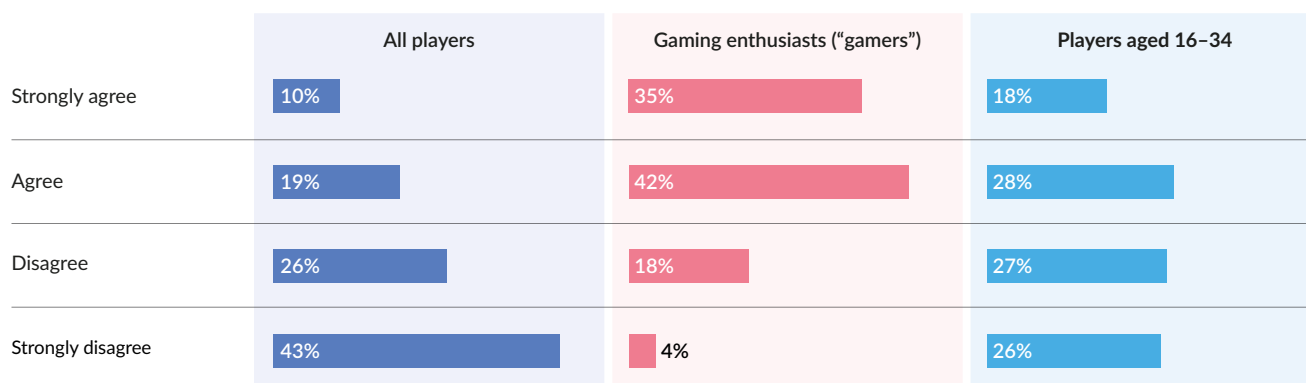
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Given the elevated levels of sexism and queerphobia evident among enthusiasts (see Chapter 4 on group-focused enmity), it is not surprising that female and queer players in particular have had such experiences. Although they do not report discrimination based on their gender more frequently overall, when the effects of belonging to different gaming types, being of different ages, and having different educational attainment levels are taken into account, gender and sexual orientation emerge as significant predictors of gender-based discrimination. Queer people also report more often that they take specific measures in gaming – such as choosing a name that is as neutral

as possible or specifying a different gender – to shield themselves from negative comments (33% vs. 18% of heterosexual respondents).

Overall, it is clear that experiences of discrimination and violence are particularly widespread among those who regularly engage in open, interactive multiplayer environments. This also means that young people are particularly affected by this. The high density of communication and the frequent lack of social regulation in these spaces appear to encourage players to engage in offensive, threatening or discriminatory interactions online.

FIGURE 22 Gaming plays an important role in self-perception

“Gaming plays an important role in my life and my self-perception.”

Missing value: don't know; Basis: all players; weighted results.

Source: own depiction.

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5.5 Gaming, identity and societal perceptions

The following section takes a broader analytical view by looking at two questions: How is gaming perceived by society? And how do players view themselves and their hobby within this context?

First, it is revealing to ask what significance players themselves attach to gaming in their lives. Just under a third of all players surveyed (29%) say that “gaming plays an important role in my life and self-perception.” However, one can also add that the younger the respondent, the more important gaming is. For example, almost half (46%) of people aged 16–34 and almost a third (30%) of people aged 35–54 say that gaming plays an important role in their lives – which are remarkably high figures for both groups (see Figure 22).

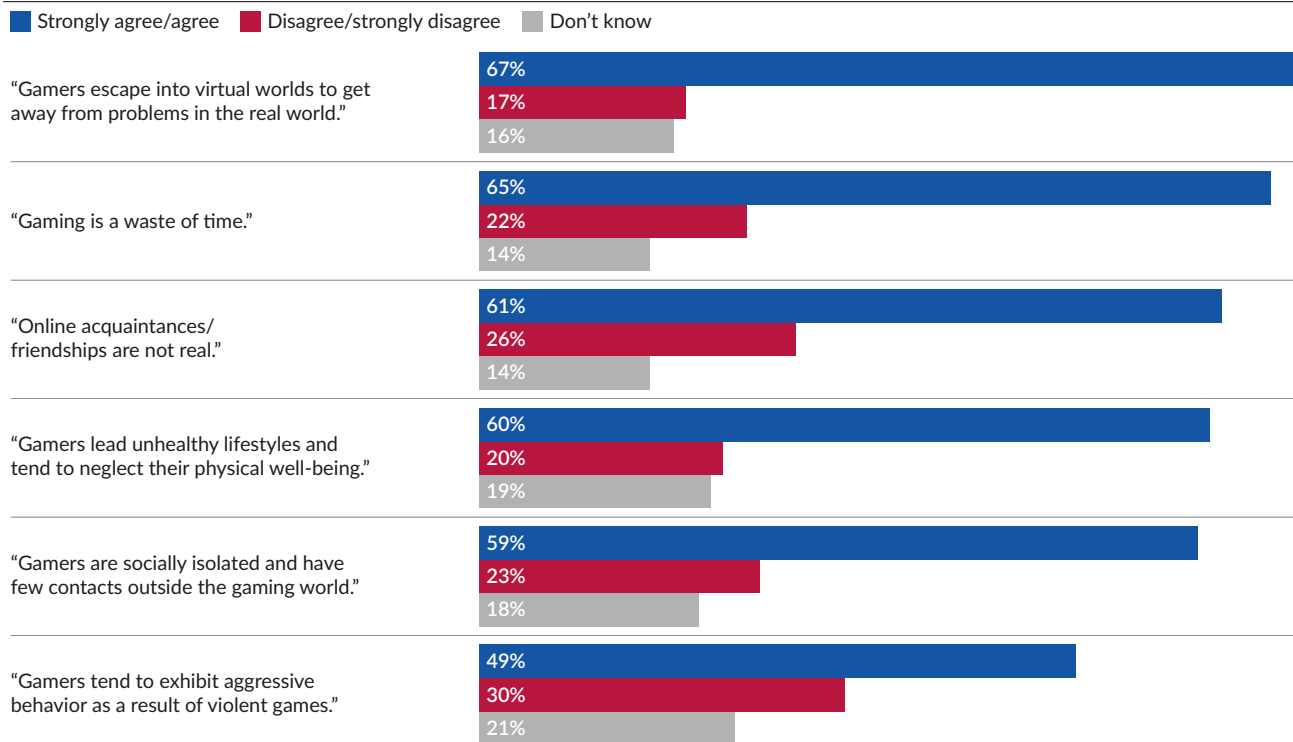
In addition to age, the gender of the respondents plays a key role, as male players (38%) agree with this statement much more often than female players (20%). The effect is even more pronounced when age and gender are combined. In this case, 57% of the surveyed men under 35 say that gaming plays an important role in their lives and self-perception, compared to 31% of women under 35.

These findings are particularly evident among enthusiasts, who are predominantly young and male. Of them, 77% say that gaming plays a big part in their life and how they see themselves. For many players, especially young males, gaming in all its diversity is much more than just a recreational activity – it is something that shapes their identities and lives.

5.5.1 Many players want recognition

Those who see gaming as part of their identity also expect this reality of their lives to be socially accepted. For example, 57% of all respondents between the ages of 16 and 34 would like to see “gaming become more widely accepted as part of society’s culture.” This desire is particularly pronounced among enthusiasts, 81% of whom agree with this statement. The source of this desire for more recognition becomes clear when one considers that it is a hobby often viewed with prejudice, as every second player (50%) reports seeing “prejudices against gamers that do not correspond to reality.” Here, too, it is young people who perceive this prejudice most often, as almost two-thirds (65%) of 16- to 34-year-olds and 70% of male respondents in this group believe that there are “still many prejudices against gamers.” Once again, this opinion is most widely held by enthusiasts, with 79% of them stating that there are still many misconceptions about “gamers” that do not correspond to reality.

FIGURE 23 Prejudices about gaming among all non-players



Due to rounding, percentages do not always add up to 100. Basis: all non-players; weighted results.

Source: own depiction.

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5.5.2 Strong prejudices against gaming

On an analytical level, the question arises as to whether social prejudices against players actually exist – or whether this is primarily the subjective perception of a specific subgroup. In fact, the data shows that this prejudice can actually be quantified – especially when it comes to the social behavior, lifestyle and hobbies of digital game players. For example, 65% of all respondents who do not play games consider gaming to be a waste of time (see Figure 23). The majority of non-players also believe that “gamers lead unhealthy lifestyles and tend to neglect their physical well-being” (60% agree) or that “gamers escape into virtual worlds to get away from problems in the real world” (67% agree). Almost half (49%) of those who do not play games also agree with the statement that “gamers tend to exhibit aggressive behavior as a result of violent games.”

Prejudices regarding social aspects are also pronounced. A majority of non-players believe that “gamers are socially isolated and have few contacts outside the gaming world” (agreement: 59%) or that “online acquaintances/friendships are not real” (agreement: 61%).

One possible explanation for these strong prejudices could be their lack of personal experience with games. For example, only 27% of players agree that gaming is a waste of time, compared to 65% of non-players. These differences can be observed with varying degrees of intensity across all prejudices surveyed – and they largely correspond to the divide between players and non-players. The data therefore suggests that a significant proportion of these negative attitudes are based on a lack of personal experience with the medium. Those who personally have no contact with games tend to resort to stereotypical patterns of interpretation, whereas players themselves judge themselves very differently.

5.5.3 Description of the actual situation, or internalized prejudices?

However, it is striking that players – including enthusiasts – not only perceive prejudices, but also agree with some common prejudices about gaming. Although a large proportion of enthusiasts report positive social experiences in the gaming environment (e.g., friendships and/or support in communities), the idea that digital friendships are not real resonates strongly with 45% of this group – a similar level of agreement to that found among frequent players (48%).

With regard to social isolation and loneliness, the picture is also complex: Many players feel socially integrated in their gaming environments, yet 41% of all players agree with the statement that “gamers are socially isolated and have few contacts outside the gaming world.” In this case, it is noteworthy that even among enthusiasts (i.e., those who identify themselves as “gamers”), 42% agree with this statement. At the same time, it is unclear whether respondents are describing themselves as “socially isolated” or whether they consider this statement to be more accurate for “gamers” in general.

These results give rise to two key observations: The discrepancy between the sense of belonging experienced in gaming communities and the simultaneous agreement with stereotypes about gaming could indicate that players feel socially integrated in their own gaming practice, but not outside their communities. For this reason, as well, social labeling processes of others fall on fertile ground and are sometimes reproduced, consciously or unconsciously.

The survey questions about prejudices seem to correspond to real-world experience. In some player groups, loneliness is a reality that cannot be overcome by online interactions alone. This conclusion is also suggested by the findings in the section on loneliness as a factor relevant to democracy. The high level of agreement with the statement that gamers are socially isolated could therefore be an expression of internalized social narratives or provide evidence of real-world social challenges within this group.

Overall, the data clearly shows that even though gaming is experienced by many as a socially meaningful activity, it is still viewed critically by society. Recognizing gaming as a largely socially effective practice is thus at odds with the cultural assessment of the non-gaming societal environment – a conflict that is also reflected in the self-image and social experiences of digital game players. On the other hand, the figures suggest that gaming as a social practice is perceived as more effective when it is linked to analog interactions.

6 | Summary

This study provides the first nuanced empirical analysis of the political, social and cultural dimensions of gaming in Germany. It makes it clear that gaming and the associated digital spaces are much more than just a recreational activity. Instead, they shape identity, create and foster a sense of social belonging, and open up new forms of social participation – while at the same time posing challenges in terms of group-focused enmity, loneliness and hate speech in the digital realm. The data shows that gaming communities have established themselves as important spaces for social and political communication, and that the potential

and risks of these spaces have not yet been sufficiently taken into account in youth-related policies or political-education efforts.

The following sections summarize the key findings of this study. In addition, they highlight areas where action is needed, reveal opportunities that can be derived from the empirical findings, and formulate recommendations on how policymakers, civil society and researchers can constructively address these hitherto neglected areas of life.

6.1 Key findings

Gaming as a social practice

- **Gaming is a widespread phenomenon.**

Over two-thirds of people in Germany over the age of 16 play digital games.

- **Games and Gaming communities create and foster social connections and a sense of belonging.**

They offer young and marginalized groups, in particular, a space for friendships, interaction and support – often beyond the digital realm. When virtual contacts transition into analog encounters, they have a unique social impact.

- **Gaming shapes one's identity.**

For many players, especially young males, gaming in all its diversity is much more than a recreational activity. Rather, it is an integral part of their self-image and life.

Political dimensions of gaming

- **Players are politically diverse – and not a homogeneous group.**
Players can be found in all social milieus across all gaming devices. Due to the size and heterogeneity of this group alone, the commonly used term “gamer” proves unsuitable for in-depth analysis and is not used by large segments of players to describe themselves.
- **Gaming is political.**
Many players perceive games as a political medium and discuss socio-political issues in their gaming communities. Enthusiasts, in particular, use gaming communities as spaces for discourse, even if they do not always condone this discourse.
- **Digital game players display a high level of social and political engagement – especially in digital spaces.**
Many players actively participate in democratic processes, such as joining demonstrations, signing petitions and making statements on social media. Their high level of digital savviness suggests that enthusiasts, in particular, are helping to shape social discourse online.

Risks and potential

- **Attitudes expressing group-focused are more prevalent among young male respondents.**
The group of enthusiasts, which is 75% male and younger than the average digital game player, shows significantly higher rates of agreement with antisemitic, sexist and queerphobic statements than other types of players.
- **The digital socialization of enthusiasts has the potential to address the widespread loneliness among young people in a targeted manner.** After all, more than half of this predominantly young subgroup reports feeling lonely.
- **Prejudices about players are widespread.**
Non-players often attribute negative characteristics to “gamers.” What is striking here is that players themselves sometimes share these negative perceptions – despite their own positive experiences with gaming.
- **Experiences of hate speech and discrimination are an integral part of online multiplayer experiences.**
The more people play in this setting, the more they are confronted with insults and discrimination.

6.2 Research desiderata

Gaming communities are dynamic forums for communication that are constantly changing and must be viewed in relation to current societal developments. This requires in-depth analysis of long-term change processes and their social interdependencies. In addition to enthusiasts, who have been studied extensively, other types of players are also coming into focus,

especially those who operate outside visible platforms (e.g., Twitch and Reddit). Addressing these groups in a targeted manner offers considerable potential, but doing so will first require empirical research to identify suitable approaches and communication channels.

The mechanisms behind the attitudes expressing group-focused enmity prevalent among enthusiasts need to be further investigated, as does the specific significance of gaming communities for queer individuals, which has not been sufficiently researched to date.

At the same time, the positive democratic trust profile of enthusiasts – with their proximity to academia/science and critical, selective use of information – points to the existence of potential at the intersection of ef-

forts to promote democracy and to combat disinformation. This potential must be tapped through a deeper understanding of the underlying mechanisms of action.

Quantitative long-term studies and qualitative in-depth research are key tools for systematically tracking changes in and the persistence of attitudes and practices within gaming communities in their societal context.

6.3 Recommended actions

The study shows that gaming is socially and politically relevant because it shapes the lives of many people in Germany, especially young people. It follows that gaming must be taken seriously as a cultural practice at the intersection of youth culture, spaces for digital discourse, and socio-political negotiation processes. Those who acknowledge this reality can address both the (1) **potential** and the (2) **challenges** of gaming in a more targeted manner.

- 1) In order to make the democratic potential visible and usable, gaming must be recognized as a cultural practice and a space for socio-political discourse. Games and platforms (e.g., Discord and Twitch) serve as public forums in which social issues are debated. They must be recognized, researched and utilized as such.

The study shows that the young group of gaming enthusiasts, in particular, is characterized by a high level of interest in politics, socio-political engagement and community ties as well as a high degree of trust in democratic processes and academia/science. This group offers a promising basis for fact-based, participatory offerings and could be targeted both as a recipient group and as a multiplier group, including for the purpose of specifically addressing problematic attitudes (e.g., antisemitism and queerphobia).

Players, influencers and the gaming communities themselves are also called upon to actively engage in the related public discourse, to take a stand, and to speak up – especially when it comes to political and civil society actors – as prejudices and reservations can be dispelled when people are open-minded and more familiar with each other. This applies to gaming as much as to any other area.

- 2) At the same time, it is essential to take gaming seriously in order to clearly identify the associated tensions and address them in a targeted manner. For many young people, digital gaming worlds are crucial experiential spaces. Hate speech, discrimination, attitudes expressing group-focused enmity, and the high prevalence of loneliness require conscious, concerted and vigorous action – as does the widespread prevalence of loneliness. Educational institutions, teachers and families are called upon to create safe spaces, encourage counterarguments, and offer young people a trust-filled environment in which they can talk openly about their digital lives. Given the ambivalent findings on enthusiasts, this group in particular must be viewed in a nuanced manner, as they offer considerable potential as multipliers but also often exhibit patterns of enmity toward others at an above-average rate. The key requirements for this include listening with an open mind and dismantling prejudices against gaming and digital game players.

Educational approaches should open up opportunities to explore digital spaces together with young people, to dismantle prejudices and to foster intergenerational dialogue. This will enable the specialized knowledge of digitally savvy young people to be combined with the life experience and networks of older generations. Simply relying on platforms to regulate themselves is not enough – informed and dialogue-oriented education is needed.

Appendix

TABLE A1 Platform use

	All respondents	All players	Gaming enthusiasts ("gamers")	Frequent players	Exclusively mobile players	Occasional players
YouTube	80%	86%	95%	84%	82%	85%
Facebook	61%	64%	69%	64%	69%	59%
Instagram	56%	64%	78%	55%	65%	61%
TikTok	31%	39%	63%	32%	33%	31%
Telegram	23%	27%	45%	21%	22%	22%
Steam	16%	22%	56%	17%	3%	12%
X/Twitter	17%	21%	48%	17%	8%	13%
Discord	15%	21%	55%	14%	6%	11%
Twitch	13%	19%	51%	12%	4%	9%
Reddit	12%	16%	42%	11%	4%	9%
Tumblr	5%	7%	18%	4%	2%	3%
BlueSky	5%	6%	16%	3%	2%	3%
Kick	4%	5%	14%	3%	1%	2%

Basis: all respondents; weighted results.

Source: own depiction.

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FIGURE A1 Preferred game modes

Which game modes do you play?

	All players	Gaming enthusiasts ("gamers")	Frequent players	Exclusively mobile players	Occasional players
Single-player (alone)	86%	77%	86%	89%	89%
In-person with friends	19%	40%	16%	4%	14%
Online multiplayer with friends	26%	63%	20%	9%	14%
Online multiplayer with strangers	20%	40%	17%	15%	13%

Multiple selections were possible; Basis: all players; weighted results.

Source: own depiction.

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TABLE A2 Genres played

What kind of games do you play at least occasionally?

■ All players
 ■ Gaming enthusiasts ("gamers")
 ■ Frequent players
 ■ Exclusively mobile players
 ■ Occasional players

Strategy games (e.g., Age of Empires, Teamfight Tactics, Starcraft)	68%	51%	71%	80%	73%
Social and party games/couch co-op (e.g., Super Mario Party, Quizduell, Among Us)	42%	54%	39%	28%	43%
Sports/racing games (e.g., FIFA, Mario Kart, Rocket League)	37%	59%	38%	10%	35%
(Action-)adventure (e.g., The Last of Us, Horizon Zero Dawn, Grand Theft Auto, Dead by Daylight)	36%	78%	31%	6%	27%
Jump 'n' run/platform games (e.g., Super Mario, Cuphead)	32%	51%	30%	11%	30%
Simulation games (e.g., Sims, Zoo Tycoon, Cities: Skylines, House Flipper)	32%	53%	29%	15%	27%
Strategy games (e.g., Age of Empires, Teamfight Tactics, Starcraft)	29%	53%	29%	11%	20%
Shooter (e.g., Call of Duty, Counter Strike)	28%	64%	23%	5%	18%
Role-playing games (e.g., The Witcher, The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, Genshin Impact)	24%	58%	20%	3%	15%
Battle royale shooter (e.g., Fortnite, Apex Legends, PUBG/Mobile)	21%	53%	17%	3%	12%
Sandbox (e.g., Minecraft, Roblox)	20%	47%	15%	4%	12%
Survival (e.g., DayZ, Valheim, Ark: Survival Evolved)	19%	52%	13%	2%	11%
Cozy games (e.g., Stardew Valley, Animal Crossing)	19%	39%	15%	7%	14%
MMORPGs (e.g., Final Fantasy XIV, World of Warcraft)	17%	47%	13%	3%	7%
Brawler/fighting games (e.g., Tekken, Street Fighter, Super Smash Brothers)	16%	39%	12%	3%	11%
Music and dance games (e.g., Guitar Hero, Just Dance)	15%	31%	12%	3%	12%
Lifestyle games (e.g., Fitness Boxing, Ring Fit Adventure)	14%	32%	11%	2%	8%
MOBA games (e.g., League of Legends, Arena Of Valor, DOTA 2, Brawl Stars)	14%	40%	10%	2%	5%
Soulslike games (e.g., Darksouls, Elden Ring)	12%	38%	8%	1%	4%

Basis: all respondents; weighted results

Source: own depiction.

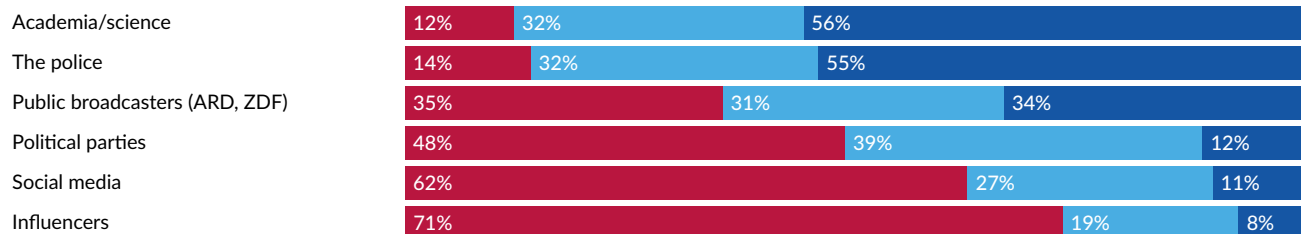
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FIGURE A2 Supplement to Figure 10

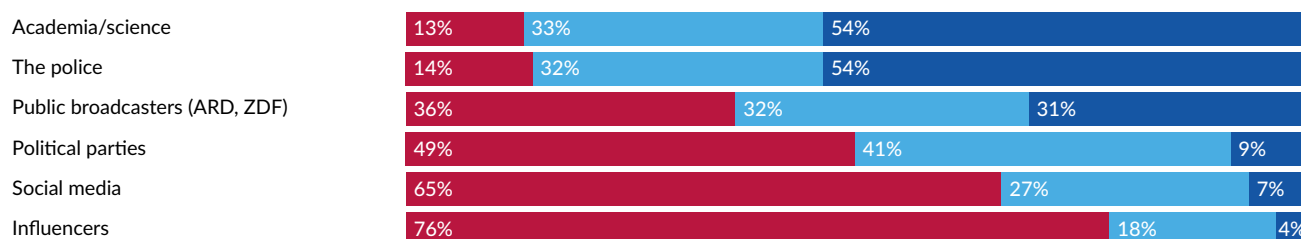
Please indicate how much confidence you have in the following.

■ Little or no confidence ■ Some confidence ■ (Very) much confidence

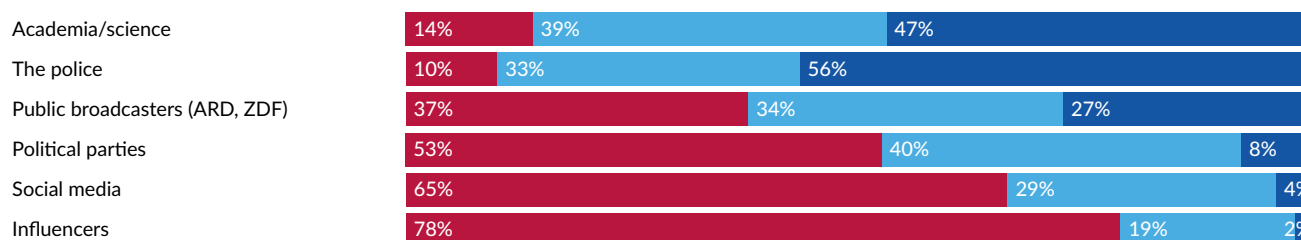
All players



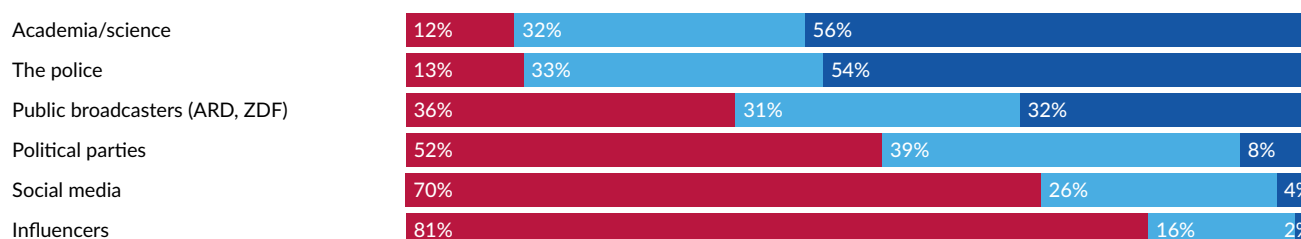
Frequent players



Exclusively mobile players



Occasional players



Missing value: don't know. Due to rounding, percentages do not always add up to 100. Basis: all respondents; weighted results.

Source: own depiction.

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