

Virtual(ly) Women Athletes

A Study of Gendered Power Relations
and Inequality in Sports-Themed Esports

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FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

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Egil Trasti Rogstad

SUMMARY

This thesis focuses on gendered power relations and inequality in sports-themed esports (esports based on sports video games). Due to the continuing merging of sports-themed esports and traditional sports, the esports industry's deeply rooted issues concerning a significant underrepresentation of women, sexist stereotypes and harassment constitute a major challenge. The aim of the thesis is to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex issues and challenges that women players face within sports-themed esports. The following main research question is posed: How do gendered power relations reflect gender inequality in sports-themed esports?

This research question is addressed by means of four separate studies, each with their own research questions and methodological approaches. Article I is based on a traditional narrative review that presents the current research on gender and esports. In Article II, a document analysis is used to examine the gendered challenges and opportunities relating to the International Olympic Committee's (the IOC) strategy to include esports in the Olympic Games. Article III is based on a Foucauldian discourse analysis and examines how the media constructed Chiquita Evans when she became the first woman player in the NBA 2K League. Article IV draws on an online survey of sports video game players to examine their perceptions of gendered character representations in these games.

Although esports is regarded as a non-physical form of sport in which men have no physical competitive advantage over women, the findings in the thesis further demonstrate how sports-themed esports participation involves additional challenges for women players. As a result, the traditional dynamics of male domination in sports seem inescapable, even in the virtual space of sports-themed esports.

SAMMENDRAG

Denne doktorgradsavhandlingen fokuserer på kjønnete maktforhold og ulikhet i e-sport basert på sportsspill. Med den stadige tettere koblingen av sportsspill-basert e-sport og tradisjonell idrett utgjør e-sportsindustriens dyptliggende problemer knyttet til underrepresentasjon av kvinner, kjønnsdiskriminerende stereotyper og trakassering en betydelig utfordring. Målet med denne avhandlingen er å bidra til en dypere forståelse av de komplekse problemstillingene og utfordringene som kvinnelige spillere møter innenfor denne grenen av e-sport. Avhandlingen er basert på følgende hovedproblemstilling: Hvordan reflekterer kjønnete maktforhold kjønnsulikhet i sportsspill-basert e-sport?

Denne hovedproblemstillingen utforskes gjennom fire separate studier, som hver er basert på individuelle forskningsspørsmål og metodiske tilnærminger. Artikkel I er basert på en tradisjonell narrativ litteraturgjennomgang av tidligere forskning på e-sport og kjønn. I Artikkel II anvendes det en dokumentanalyse for å undersøke potensielle kjønnete utfordringer og muligheter knyttet til IOCs strategi for å inkludere e-sport i OL. I Artikkel III brukes det en diskursanalyse med utgangspunkt i Foucault for å studere hvordan media fremstilte Chiquita Evans da hun ble den første kvinnelige spilleren til å konkurrere i den amerikanske e-sportligaen NBA 2K League. Artikkel IV bygger på en nettbasert spørreundersøkelse av sportsspill-spillere for å undersøke deres oppfatning av hvordan kjønnete spillkarakterer blir fremstilt i sportsspill.

Selv om e-sport blir betraktet som en ikke-fysisk form for sport der menn ikke har noen fysiske konkurransefortrinn sammenlignet med kvinner, understreker funnene i denne avhandlingen at deltakelse i sportsspill-basert e-sport innebærer en rekke tillegg utfordringer for kvinnelige spillere. Dermed kan det tyde på at de tradisjonelle formene for mannlig dominans i sport og idrett er uunngåelige, selv innenfor de virtuelle rammene til e-sport basert på sportsspill.

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ABBREVIATIONS

EIGE – European Institute for Gender Equality

ESA – Entertainment Software Association

GAMAG – Global Alliance for Media and Gender

GMMP – Global Media Monitoring Project

IOC – International Olympic Committee

LAN – Local Area Network

NESH – National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the
Humanities

NFL – National Football League

NSD – Norwegian Centre for Research Data

SVGs – Sports video games

UN – United Nations

LIST OF ARTICLES

The thesis is based on the following four articles:

Article I

Rogstad, E. T. (2021). Gender in eSports research: a literature review. *European Journal for Sport and Society*, 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16138171.2021.1930941>

Article II

Rogstad, E. T., Błaalid, B., & Tjønnndal, A. (2021). Who are included? A gender perspective on the IOC's strategy for esports in the Olympics. In A. Tjønnndal (Ed.), *Idrett, kjønn og ledelse: festskrift til Jorid Hovden* (pp. 211-228). Fagbokforlaget.

Article III

Rogstad, E. T. (re-submitted after review). Media (Re)presentation of a Black Woman Esports Player: The Case of Chiquita Evans in the NBA 2K League. *International Journal of Sport Communication*.

Article IV

Rogstad, E. T., & Skauge, M. (2022). The importance of female characters in esports: A quantitative analysis of players' perceptions of gendered character representations in sports video games. In A. Tjønnndal (Ed.), *Social issues in esports* (pp. 65-80). Routledge.

CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

In this thesis I examine gendered power relations and inequality in sports-themed esports (esports based on sports video games, hereafter abbreviated as SVGs). The purpose of the thesis is to learn more about the complex issues and challenges that women players face in sports-themed esports environments. In this opening chapter I first present the research focus, research questions and aims of the study. Next, I outline the backdrop to the study by focusing on esports as an intersection of sport, the media, digital games and the status of gender (in)equality in these fields. Finally, I present the structure of the thesis.

Research focus, research questions and aims of the study

Esports, or electronic sports, is a form of organised competitive gaming that was first introduced in the late 1990s (Wagner, 2006). Since then esports has developed into a worldwide phenomenon, attracts a global audience of 532 million and brings in close to 1.38 billion US dollars in revenue (Tristão, 2022). As the term esports indicates, the framing of esports is closely linked to traditional sports. For instance, the production of esports events often incorporates traditional sport elements like team jerseys, player walk-outs and the handing out of various audience merchandise, such as flags and clappers (Ruotsalainen, 2022). The popularity of esports, especially amongst younger people, has also increasingly captured the interest and involvement of traditional sports organisations, clubs and media outlets. This has contributed to the sportification of esports even further (Frandsen, 2020). Consequently, portraying esports as sport is thought to increase its social recognition and legitimacy, with sport often being seen as the ideal that esports should strive towards (Heere, 2018; Jenny et al., 2017).

However, framing esports as sport has several consequences for the people participating in it. For instance, it limits how participants can negotiate their identities and influences how gender can be performed (Taylor et al., 2009; Taylor & Vorhees,

2019). Sport has been and continues to be a site in which hegemonic notions of gender persist and where hegemonic masculinity is negotiated, confirmed and contested, which to some extent often prevents people from carrying out sport based on their gender (Louveau, 2004; Plaza et al., 2017). When portrayed as sport, esports is therefore more likely to reproduce the traditional and athletic masculinity seen in sport, rather than the “geek” masculinity that is prevalent in game culture (Taylor, 2012; see also Article I). Gaming and gaming environments have traditionally been perceived as activities for young, predominantly White and Asian, men (Paaßen et al., 2017). Several studies have also demonstrated that women players are prime targets for harassment and hostility in gaming environments (Richard & Gray, 2018; Ruvalcaba et al., 2018; Taylor, 2012; Taylor & Witkowski, 2010; Witkowski, 2013). Consequently, the framing of esports as sport is neither harmless nor without consequences but influences what is regarded as appropriate and desirable ways of performing identity (Ruotsalainen, 2022).

Due to their close connection to “real” sport, SVGs represent the genre of esports that is most frequently connected to and incorporated into traditional sports organisations and clubs (Mirabito & Kucek, 2019). This has led to a sportification of sports-themed esports (esports based on SVGs) which could influence or intensify gendered issues and challenges (Frandsen, 2020). Esports, and especially sports-themed esports, is often imagined as a virtual form of sport that *could* be a level playing-field in which both men and women players have an equal chance of succeeding. However, at present the continuing incorporation of sports-themed esports into traditional sport and how this process reflects gender (in)equality is still underexplored in research.

Against this background, the aim of this thesis is to examine gender (in)equality in sports-themed esports. This examination focuses specifically on how gendered stereotypes, representations and power dynamics reflect gender (in)equality in these environments. The merging of esports and traditional sports requires negotiation and involvement with historically shaped hegemonic assumptions and structures at several

levels, both within and around the institution of sport, that often place women players in vulnerable positions. This thesis therefore contributes new knowledge about the complex issues that women players face in sports-themed esports environments. Based on the background and aim of the thesis, the main research question is:

How do gendered power relations reflect gender (in)equality in sports-themed esports?

This research question is addressed by means of four separate studies, each led by individual underlying research questions that collectively serve to inform the main research question indicated above. Taken together, these articles explore how gender power relations are reflected in research (Article I), sports policy (Article II), the media (Article III) and audience perceptions (Article IV). In the following I briefly outline how each of the articles relates to the main research question.

Article I focuses on the main research question by examining the construction and performance of gendered identities in esports as described in current research on gender and esports. More specifically, it poses the following research question: “How is the theoretical concept of hegemonic masculinity used in the literature to understand gendered power inequalities in esports?” This theoretical perspective was selected because it was repeatedly used in the reviewed articles. Methodologically, the research question is examined by means of a literature review. The review addresses the idea that esports may be a form of sport that can provide a level playing field for both men and women and demonstrates how existing research has rejected this idea. This is done by identifying how esports has become moulded by the same hegemonic conceptions of gender that are often found in traditional sports and which lead to significant differences in how men and women players are allowed to construct and perform their identities in esports environments.

Article II addresses the main research question by analysing how the IOC's policy for the inclusion of esports in the Olympic Movement and Olympic Games may create challenges in terms of policies related to gender equality in sport. More specifically, the following research question is posed: "Which gender political dilemmas and challenges accompany the IOC's strategy for the inclusion of esports (SVGs) in the Olympic Games?" The aim of this article is to link the gender issues in esports with the objectives, values and gender policies of the Olympic Movement and discuss how gender equality can be advanced by the inclusion of esports in the Olympic Games. Methodologically, this article is based on a qualitative document analysis of the published and public information concerning the IOC's strategy for the inclusion of esports. Our findings indicate that the potential inclusion of esports may involve challenges related to which competition model best protects women esports players' opportunities and experiences while competing, and how mixed-gender or gender-divided competition can effectively promote equality in esports.

Article III focuses on the main research question by critically examining how the media contributes to confirming or challenging gendered representations and stereotypes in their coverage of esports. In this article, I conduct a media discourse analysis based on the case of Chiquita Evans, who was the first woman player to be drafted into the basketball-themed NBA 2K League. More specifically, this article explores the following research question: "How was Chiquita Evans constructed in the media in relation to the established gendered stereotypes and power dynamics in esports during her participation in the 2019 NBA 2K League season?" As one of very few Black women players in professional esports, the case of Chiquita Evans facilitates an interesting discussion about how ethnicity can influence the construction of players' identities. The findings in this article suggest that while the media portrayal of Evans increased the respect and acceptance of her as a woman player, it also reinforced the gender stereotypes and power dynamics that marginalise other (ordinary) women players.

Article IV addresses the main research question by examining players' perceptions of gendered character representations in the games themselves. More specifically, the following research question is posed: "How do players perceive gendered character representations in the sports video game genre?" The portrayal and proliferation of female game characters have been found to play an important role in the overall negative stereotyping of women in gaming environments. The aim of this article is to explore players' perceptions of gendered character representations in SVGs and the importance of these representations for players. Methodologically, the article is based on an online survey of 444 SVG players (79% men and 21% women). The findings reveal a clear gendered pattern of how players perceive game characters and indicate that women have clearer and stronger perception of female characters than men.

The literature review in Article I demonstrates that even though studies of gender and esports have focused on the emergence of athletic masculinity and its implications for the construction of other forms of masculinities and femininities, this line of research has a limited interaction with SVGs and sports-themed esports. Given that the direct integration of sports-themed esports into traditional sport frameworks may further influence or intensify the issues that women players experience, the overall aim of the thesis is to explore this assumption further by providing insights into gender-specific issues in and around sports-themed esports. In the following I expand on esports and how it may be interpreted as an intersection of the media, sport and digital games.

Contextualising the research focus: Gender (in)equality at the intersection of media, sport and digital games

Gender equality has been a widely discussed political topic in recent decades. Its meaning varies across contexts but is often linked to equal opportunity, combatting discrimination and promoting diversity (Lombardo et al., 2009). Today, gender equality has become generally acknowledged as a political aim, with many governments and multinational institutions working towards this goal. For instance, the fifth Sustainable

Development Goal (SDG) developed by the United Nations (UN) in 2015 for a more sustainable future for all is to “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” (United Nations, n.d.). Although in many countries the role of women in politics, the labour market and society has improved significantly over the past decades, issues of gender equality in diverse areas of society still remain (Lombardo et al., 2009).

This thesis examines gender (in)equality in a new and popular digitised form of sport - esports. Esports is described as a socio-technological phenomenon that has roots in sport and the media but has emerged in a digital world beyond the traditional confines of sport, media and culture (Scholz, 2019). Given that esports has been defined as an intersection of digital games, media and sport, the same stereotypes, prejudices and barriers that girls and women encounter in technological- and sporting spaces enhance the possibility of negative experiences in gaming contexts (Holden et al., 2020; McCullough et al., 2020; Yücel & Rızvanoğlu, 2019). While these consequences continue to negatively influence girls’ and women’s gaming experiences, they may be further influenced by games that replicate real-life sport (Darvin et al., 2021). Despite the substantial social impact of sports culture and the popularity of SVGs (SVGs), the sports video game genre has been largely overlooked in both sport and gaming research, in particular that related to gender aspects (Bogost, 2013; Consalvo, 2013; Mirabito & Kucek, 2019). As a result, a deeper understanding of the convergence of traditional sport competitions, digital esports contexts and the conditions for girls and women in these intersecting environments is needed (Darvin et al., 2021). To address this research gap, the aim of this thesis is to examine how the merging of traditional sports and esports and the integration of esports into traditional sports organisations reflect on gender inequality and women players’ conditions in this intersecting environment of the media, sport and digital games. In the following, I briefly present how gender (in)equality has been addressed in research in the broader scholarly fields of the media, sport and digital games.

Media has been identified as one of the most important areas for promoting gender equality globally (Ross & Padovani, 2017), in that it greatly influences the ways in which people perceive the social world, themselves and others (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2009). Therefore, the way the media portrays gender has also been found to impact social perceptions of men and women, gendered norms and stereotypes (Carter & Steiner, 2004; Rhode, 1995; Ross & Padovani, 2017; Van Zoonen, 1994). Research has also demonstrated how stereotypical gender depictions conveyed by the media serve to reinforce traditional conceptions of gender roles, jobs and personal characteristics, as well as attitudes to future life choices (e.g., Appel & Weber, 2021; Knight & Giuliano, 2001; Lemish & Götz, 2017; Wood, 1994). Scholars like Croteau and Hoynes (2019) argue that media content tends to reproduce and exaggerate existing social inequalities related to gender, thereby reflecting the social perspectives of the traditionally male-governed media industry.

Research has further argued that inclusiveness in the newsroom is important due to a presumption that women and men journalists and media executives work differently, and/or that they should (Eide & Orgeret, 2015; Steiner, 2019). Although the presence of women as reporters and journalists has increased significantly over the past decades to 42 percent in 2020 at an international level (Macharia, 2020), news organisations are still reluctant to promote women to executive positions (Steiner, 2019). However, some studies suggest that gender balance among journalists is more important, as women journalists tend to choose female sources to a greater extent than men (Allern, 1999; Macharia, 2020). On the other hand, van Zoonen (1994) argues that journalists (women and men) are socialised towards an inherited male journalistic norm that limits the possibilities for change towards greater gender equity (see also Melin, 2008). As a result, it may seem that changes in the journalistic product are more dependent on a particular attention to gender issues and internal editorial initiatives (Eide & Orgeret, 2015).

Several interventionist efforts have been undertaken to identify persistent issues, examine the progress that has been made in this area and suggest potential ways of advancing gender equality in the media industry. For instance, initiatives such as UNESCO's Global Alliance for Media and Gender (GAMAG) and the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) have been established in recent years to improve women's involvement in and access to expression and decision-making in and through the media and new communication technologies, and to promote fair and non-stereotypical representations of women in the media (Ross & Padovani, 2017). Despite such efforts, data collected from 116 countries for the 2020 Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) report "Who makes the news?" revealed that improvements in the gender dimensions of the news media have been modest and, in some cases, stagnant (Macharia, 2020). The number of media stories that clearly challenge gender stereotypes has remained unchanged at 3 percent since 2005 (Macharia, 2020). According to the report, women only accounted for 25 percent of subjects and sources in the media (Macharia, 2020). Such findings confirm that there is still a fundamental disparity regarding the presence of women and men in the media that necessitates a thorough reappraisal and revision of media policies and practices.

Sport, like the media, plays an important role in the reproduction of gender stereotypes (Cahn, 2015; Fasting, 2017). Traditionally, the realm of sport has been shown to constitute a male domain that validates conventional notions about masculinity as a collection of innate male qualities that can be enhanced through sporting performances (Anderson, 2009; Cahn, 2015; Tjønnndal, 2016). As a result, women athletes often find themselves battling with second-class athletic status and struggling to negotiate between cultural conceptions of sport as a masculine domain and their desire to participate in it (Cahn, 2015). According to research on sexual harassment and abuse in sport, harassment of women is common in most sports and often increases with performance level (Fasting et al., 2004; Fasting et al., 2010). In

some cases, harassment can lead to sexual violence against women (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2005; Fasting & Sand, 2015; Bjørnseth & Szabo, 2018).

However, in recent decades gender equality in sport has made significant progress due to advocacy efforts (Elling et al., 2018; Matthews, 2021). At an international level, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has played an important role by requiring the participation of women in new sports seeking inclusion in the Olympic Games, stating its commitment to gender equality in the Olympic Charter and establishing the Women in Sport Commission that promotes gender equality, women's empowerment and equal opportunities for women in sports and physical activity (IOC, n.d.). In many countries, the implementation of quotas has proved to be a useful and effective tool in terms of increasing the number of women athletes, coaches, board members and executives (Adriaanse & Schofield, 2014; Fasting, 2017; Fasting & Sisjord, 2019; Hovden, 2015; Sisjord et al., 2017).

Although sport remains a field with strong ties to masculinity, the significant increase in the participation of women in sport as athletes and leaders also demonstrates that sport can be a site in which girls and women are able to challenge gender norms and stereotypes (Alsarve & Tjøndal, 2019; Cahn, 2015; Hovden, 2015; Pfister & Sisjord, 2013). As such, encouraging girls' and women's participation in sport may be an important step towards increasing gender equality, the empowerment of women, development and social change (Piggott et al., 2019; Pfister, 2010; Tjøndal, 2017).

The rapid development of digital technology in recent decades has been highlighted as a process that could empower women across the world (Wajcman et al., 2020). Spanning both public and private industries, technological advancements include elements like smart phones, internet technology, artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, social media and robotics. As a result, this "fourth industrial revolution" has brought about a new digital economy in industrialised and developing countries (Schwab, 2016). Early feminist responses were hopeful about the ability of digital

technology to empower women and change established gender relations (Wajcman, 2004). The internet was seen as liberating and democratising a new space where gender was irrelevant, and where digital technologies were considered as potentially increasing women's economic participation and social autonomy (Wajcman, 2004; Wajcman et al., 2020). Similarly, the UN has also recognised the significant potential of digital technologies in these areas by committing to Sustainability Goal 5 on Gender equality, Target 5.b. Women empowerment through ITC, which is designed to "Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women" (Goal 5, Target 5.b; United Nations, n.d.).

As in the world of sport, digital skills and competence are greatly influenced by the construction of a gendered identity (Abbiss, 2008; Wajcman et al., 2020). Here, masculinity and femininity are partly based on preconceptions about technological ability and expertise, while technology is defined as an area in which males can and do demonstrate their masculinity (Abbiss, 2008; Jenson et al., 2003). Female marginalisation from computer technology emerges as a result of the historical and cultural formation of male identity and computing as a masculine activity (Gill & Grint, 2018; Wajcman, 1994).

The topic of gender and technology is also connected to research on gender and gaming. The early history of this field of study is sometimes referred to as "three waves" of research on gender and video games, which are in turn often described along a time frame of the 1990s, 2000s and 2010s (Friman, 2015; Richard, 2013). The "first wave" in the 1990s was driven by the gender essentialist presumption that girls were not interested in gaming (see Cassell & Jenkins 1998). Digital games were perceived as a necessary entry point into a wider technological skill set and as a crucial area of knowledge in an ever increasing technological society, education and professional life. In this context the seeming lack of engagement from girls was regarded as an issue (Friman, 2022). As a response to this perceived problem, the so-called "girls' games

movement” built on this early research to create games specifically designed for them. However, despite their good intentions, these games were found to further alienate the girls and women who were already playing and reinforced the idea of gaming as a masculine activity (Friman, 2022). In more recent research in the 2000s, in the “second wave” of research on gender and gaming, the focus moved from the assumed gender differences to the social and cultural contexts of gaming (Richard, 2013). This line of research focused on how people participating in gaming get access to gaming culture and become “gamers” (e.g., Taylor, 2008; Yee, 2008), thereby emphasising the cultural and social components of gaming that go beyond the assumed and gender-essentialised differences. The “third wave” of research from the 2010s then broadened this focus by including intersectional perspectives on gaming that alongside gender also explored other markers of identity, such as ethnicity, age, sexuality, ability and class and how they influenced players’ positions and agency in gaming environments (e.g., Gray 2014; Shaw, 2015; Sundén & Svenningson, 2012). For instance, Shaw’s (2014) study of marginalised gamers examines how race, gender and sexuality impact their experience of games and how representation is a key example of this perspective in gaming research.

Taken together, the three fields described above lead to an intersectional point, namely esports. Over the past decades, esports has developed from an underground culture into one of the most common leisure activities in the world. It is a massive sports entertainment phenomenon with an audience of 465 million people worldwide and global revenues surpassing the billion-dollar mark (Wijman, 2021). Today, esports is recognised as an official sport and/or professional practice in several countries, with competitions often organised in similar fashion to traditional sporting events (Stein & Scholz, 2014).

The massive attraction of and engagement in esports, particularly among young people, have increasingly captured the interest of traditional sport stakeholders, resulting in traditional sports organisations, clubs and sports media outlets becoming

increasingly and systematically involved in esports (Frandsen, 2020). Notably, after first stating in 2017 that competitive gaming “could be considered a sporting activity” (IOC, 2017), the IOC has worked purposefully towards exploring commonalities, potential partnerships and the possibility of esports becoming recognised as an Olympic sport and part of future Olympic events (IOC, 2019). Simultaneously, esports, primarily in the form of SVGs, has become increasingly integrated into professional sports associations like the NFL, NBA and FIFA, as well as voluntary and grassroot sport clubs (Mirabito & Kucek, 2019; Tjørndal & Skauge, 2020).

The recent advancement of esports in the institution of sport demonstrates how media and communication technologies in the digital age are contributing to the creation of new sports (Frandsen, 2020). On the one hand, this illustrates the ability of digitisation to transform society and the effect of media and communication technologies on social and cultural life. On the other hand, it also highlights sport as a powerful social institution, in that several esports stakeholders consider it important to further develop the institutional framework of sport (Frandsen, 2020). Moreover, the implementation of esports into traditional sports further not only demonstrates how practices and values in esports are influenced by the institution of sport, but also how the digital, globalised media culture of esports influences the institution of sport in new ways in the digital age. As a result, the continuous negotiation and implementation of esports into traditional sports organisations is an important starting point for novel discussions about the potential (and limitations) of new forms of sport and sport participation in the age of digital media (Frandsen, 2020; Taylor, 2012). Moreover, the lack of emphasis on physical performances and the digital nature of esports influence the institution of sport in new ways and revives long running debates about the definitions and values of sport (Frandsen, 2020).

The emergence of livestreaming platforms like Twitch and YouTube has been emphasised as the most important and strongest factor in the rise of esports in recent years (Block & Haack, 2021). These platforms provide streaming and video services that

enable esports competitions to be broadcasted online to a vast range of spectators all over the world. Unlike several major sports competitions, esports competitions are usually free to watch through these services (Southern, 2017). Moreover, players also use these platforms to stream their gaming sessions publicly. Players are often equipped with microphones and web cameras so that viewers can see the faces and hear the voices of the players, thus providing spectators with unparalleled access to esports players. Contrary to traditional sports, where the notion of physical difference runs deep, esports should also (at least in theory) allow for equality that is rarely possible in sport, in that it does not require the physical defeat of an opponent (Jenny et al., 2016). Due to the lack of focus on physical prowess, many are optimistic about esports opening sport as we know it to new forms of sports participation (Kruthika, 2020). In this regard, Taylor (2012) points to esports as an area in which “there is no real reason men and women can’t play together” (p. 125). As a result, most esports competitions are open to both men and women players (Taylor, 2012). Although esports is heavily dominated by men, streaming platforms are making esports increasingly accessible to all players, and more women than ever before are now creating successful player careers (Bugle, 2021; Interpret, 2019).

Despite the huge popularity of esports and its potential as a new form of sport, there is also reason to be concerned about its sustainability due to the lack of professional standards in the esports industry (Adams et al., 2019). As yet, the esports industry is not very well organised and can only provide limited stability to participants (Timmons, 2021). For instance, women players are frequently subjected to misogynistic and sexist harassment, which over time has become perceived by many as an almost inevitable part of the competitive gaming culture (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018). Furthermore, the game companies organising esports communities are scrutinised by the general public. For instance, in June 2020 the general public’s attention was caught by a twitter thread describing over 70 claims of sexism and harassment in the gaming industry (Lorenz & Browning, 2020). In another example, in 2021 the world-renowned game publisher

Riot Games agreed to pay \$100 million to settle a gender discrimination suit with more than 2,000 current and former female employees (Browning, 2021). Such incidents have re-emphasised the need for the industry to take steps to combat such toxicity.

Although the IOC has actively explored the possibility of incorporating esports into the Olympic Games, IOC president Thomas Bach has expressed clear concerns: “We cannot have in the Olympic program a game which is promoting violence or discrimination...So-called killer-games. They, from our point of view, are contradictory to the Olympic values and cannot therefore be accepted” (Wade, 2018). A statement following the 8th Olympic Summit in 2019 concluded that the IOC would only focus on games simulating traditional sports, so-called sport video games (SVGs) or sports-themed esports (IOC, 2019). Although this approach to esports bypasses games with problematic violent content, it includes problems that as yet have received little focus. From a gender perspective, SVGs is one of the esports genres with the lowest female participation, with girls and women only making up about 2 percent of all players (Yee, 2017). Moreover, despite recent progress, SVGs have almost exclusively focused on male teams and players (Jenson & de Castell, 2010). Compared to other popular esports genres and titles, very few studies have focused specifically on SVGs (Mirabito & Kucek, 2019). If esports, through sports-themed esports, is to become a recognised and inclusive part of sport, then understanding the complexity of esports and how it connects with important subjects like gender, equality, identity and ethnicity is crucial (Kruthika, 2020; Taylor, 2012). This need for an increased understanding of the challenges associated with gender inequality in sports-themed esports forms the background to the topic, purpose and research questions of this thesis.

Structure of the thesis

The thesis consists of four research articles and a summary text, commonly referred to as a “kappe” in a Norwegian research context. The purpose of this summary text is to discuss the main research question and provide more detailed accounts of the

theoretical, analytical and methodological perspectives and frameworks used in the articles.

This introductory chapter, which presents the background, aim and main research question, is followed by Chapter 2, which provides a brief account of previous research on SVGs and gender inclusion in the fields of the media, sport and digital games. Chapter 3 contains descriptions of the theoretical and analytical foundations on which the thesis is built. Here, the theoretical perspectives on gender used in the articles are presented. These perspectives are: 1) hegemonic masculinity and 2) feminist poststructuralist theory. Chapter 4 describes the thesis' position within the philosophy of science, as well as the research project's methodological frameworks, choices and considerations. Chapter 5 gives a brief presentation of each of the four articles in the thesis. The main findings, limitations and suggestions for further research agenda of the field are discussed in Chapter 6.

Chapter summary

Over the past decade, esports has grown to become a worldwide phenomenon that attracts attention and generates economic opportunities. Esports is also typically considered to be a new and disembodied form of sport that may have great potential for gender equality and which has become increasingly integrated into traditional sports clubs and organisations. By critically examining the convergence of esports and traditional sports from a gender perspective, the thesis aims to answer the following main research question: *How do gendered power relations reflect gender (in)equality in sports-themed esports?* This question is addressed by means of four separate studies, all of which aim to provide insights into how gendered power relations are reflected in research on gender and esports (Article I), sports policy (Article II), the media (Article III) and audience perceptions (Article IV). In the following chapter I expand on these intersectional topics by reviewing the relevant literature.

CHAPTER 2 – PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON GENDER AND SOCIAL INCLUSION IN DIGITAL GAMING, THE MEDIA AND SPORT

In this chapter I present three broad areas of research that I consider particularly relevant for the research question of this thesis. These are: (1) digital games, (2) the media and (3) sport. This is because esports has often been characterised as an intersection of these three fields (Darvin et al., 2021). In each of these fields, girls and women face distinct sets of stereotypes, biases and barriers, all of which influence their experiences. Given that esports is identified as a junction of digital games, media and the sport, the same prejudices, biases and barriers that women and girls encounter in digital gaming, media and sport contexts raise the likelihood of negative experiences and linkages in esports settings (Holden et al., 2020; McCullough et al., 2020; Yücel & Rizvanoğlu, 2019). As a result, understandings of gender-based inclusion and exclusion in these three research areas are especially important for this thesis.

From a sociological point of view, social inclusion refers to social interactions between individuals that make participants parts of a whole (Østberg, 2012). Social exclusion, on the other hand, refers to social inequality, or the different opportunities and possibilities that are accessible to social groups depending on socioeconomic status, age, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexuality and/or physical/mental abilities (Collins, 2014). In gender research, scholars have pointed to how common dichotomous and naturalised understandings of gender have contributed to a gendered power relationship in which masculinity is considered as the default, gender-neutral and superior (Connell, 1995; Haavind, 1994; Hovden, 2000) in relation to femininity, which is understood as ‘the other’ and the gendered (Beauvoir, 2000). This imbalanced power relation has resulted in different gendered inequalities in several areas of society, and this chapter provides more detailed accounts of issues of gender inclusion and inequalities in the fields of (1) digital games, (2) the media and (3) sport in order to promote a deeper understanding of how they are reflected in the experiences of girls and women in SVG environments. In the final part of the chapter, I briefly outline the

current research trends in the field of SVGs generally, beyond issues of gender inclusion and inequality.

Digital games and gender

Given that esports has emerged from and is still part of gaming culture, it is important to be aware of the foundational relationship between digital games and gender, which is often overlooked. Bryce et al. (2006) argue that researchers need to consider the local and everyday contexts in which gaming occurs in order to examine how girls and women are marginalised or excluded as a result of the common or prevailing practices in digital gaming. Here, the overall aim is to gain a deeper understanding of how social interactions, everyday practices, technology access and the gendering of space influence digital gaming and women's participation prior to the actual playing of games (Bryce et al., 2006).

An early example of the gendering of technology-related environments is Kocurek's (2012) concept of technomascularity. Emerging in the 1970s and 1980s, technomascularity refers to a form of modern masculinity that combines traits of traditional hegemonic masculinity with technological usage and expertise (Kocurek, 2012). This new ideal man, who not only has physical strength, but also technological competence, has been used in a variety of contexts, including early competitive gaming environments in which this ideal was purposefully produced and performed (Kocurek, 2012). According to Kocurek (2012), arcades played a key role in the construction of gaming as a male activity and that "the arcade of history was certainly frequented by more men than women, but the nostalgic arcade seems to be an exclusive male enclave" (Kocurek, 2012, p. 217). She continues by pointing out that women were already involved in gaming, with 40% of Pong players being women, a fact that over time has often been overlooked (Kocurek, 2012, p. 39). As arcades were primarily marketed for young men, Kocurek (2012) suggests that placing the machines there may have reduced the number of women players. Historically, involvement in gaming

activities in public leisure and domestic spaces has been argued as being heavily constructed as masculine and creating distinct gendered roles (Bryce et al., 2006). In digital gaming, this gendering of space has been visible in competitions and LANs, which are largely dominated by boys and men. The girls and women who have taken part in such events have often been subjected to subordinate roles, such as mothers or girlfriends providing support or encouragement for the male players (Bryce & Rutter, 2003; Taylor et al., 2009).

In general, the content, themes and style of digital games have also been significantly gendered as masculine. This conclusion is supported by several studies conducted in the 1990s on the gendered dimensions of digital gaming and through content analyses of digital games (Dietz, 1998; Greenfield, 1994; Kafai, 1996; Kinder, 1996). For instance, in her analysis of 33 Nintendo and SEGA Games, Dietz (1998) highlights how digital games reinforce gender stereotypes and how they relate to aggressiveness and violence. Although these themes are not inherently masculine, they are often coded as such in way that makes these games less appealing to girls and women (Dietz, 1998). She emphasises that it is not only important how women are represented in digital games, but that the “most common portrayal of women was actually the complete absence of women”, which applied to 41% of the games studied (p. 433). Similarly, Cote (2018) points out that women appear in far fewer images in the Nintendo magazines from 1994 to 1999, and when they do appear they are often sexualised.

Gaming has long been widely regarded as a key entry point into computer competence. It is often assumed that only boys and men are gamers, but in actual fact girls and women typically make up around half of all gamers (ESA, 2021). Recruiting women as gamers has been an important approach in reducing the “digital gender-gap”. During the 1990s, game developers sought to attract more women into gaming by creating games with an identifiable “feminine” theme, or by making games more “transgender” by including minor changes and alterations aimed at women players (Bryce et al., 2006; Corneliussen & Mortensen, 2005). However, such initiatives to push gaming into the

female market have not been successful over time and are typically based on traditional conceptions of feminine interests and abilities. As a result, these types of games tend to reinforce gender as a stereotypical dichotomy (Castell & Bryson, 1998; Corneliussen & Mortensen, 2005; Fisher et al., 2015).

As esports has strong ties to the gaming culture, it is perhaps hardly surprising that it has been largely constructed as a male domain. However, early game studies feature a plethora of actively playing women scholars who remind us that women have always existed and found ways to negotiate their identity and femininity within the masculine domain of gaming culture (e.g., Corneliussen, 2008; Kennedy, 2006; Mortensen, 2003; Nardi, 2010; Pearce & Artemesia, 2012; Sundén, 2003; Sundén & Svenningsson, 2012; Taylor, 1999, 2003). In this regard, Taylor's (1999, 2003) and Kennedy's (2006) early research into women players serve as strong examples of how digital games can provide several opportunities for the construction of opposing meanings and identities by situating the play practices of women in a technofeminist framework and building on play and performance theory. For instance, Kennedy (2006) highlights how women players and player communities have been able to counter hegemonic representations of femininity and the masculine representation of players and game culture by the ways in which they present themselves to the online gaming community that has formed around the game *Quake*. Similarly, Zaremba (2012) shows how women gamers in the 1990s and early 2000s continuously challenged gender stereotypes, even though at the same time they had to constantly manage their self-representations within the accepted norms of feminine identity and performativity.

Nevertheless, it seems that there is a long-standing perception amongst players and fans that there is nothing to prevent women from succeeding in esports if they have the required skills and dedication. This perception, which Paul (2018), calls the "toxic meritocracy in gaming", excludes women and other marginalised players by failing to recognise how their space of opportunity is negatively influenced by their specific position as women players, and deceives those who succeed into thinking that their

achievements are simply the result of their own hard work and talent. Recent research has demonstrated that women players are very aware of hegemonic expectations and how they limit their possibilities and agency and that they are able to find ways to negotiate and challenge such barriers (Choi et al., 2020; Cote, 2017; Friman, 2022; Friman & Ruotsalainen, 2022; Richard & Gray, 2018; Ruotsalainen & Friman, 2018; Siutila & Havaste, 2019; Witkowski, 2018). Furthermore, women players face spatial and physical barriers related to access to gaming equipment (McNamee, 1999) and male-dominated social networks like LANs (Taylor, 2012). Among the different ways of negotiating femininity within gaming culture, Butt (2016) notes that some women players use affective labour by taking on roles and characters that focus on helping other players, such as healers.¹ “Gender masking” is another strategy that some women players use to negotiate their place in game cultures, which involves concealing their gender from others by not using their voices and names in game settings (Cote, 2017; Fox & Tang, 2017).

Although such strategies can be used to alleviate the gendered constraints that women players experience, their marginalised position negatively influences their experiences and agency within this space. As Ruotsalainen and Friman (2018) note, “Women are simultaneously being written out of existence and written into existing in extremely limited ways, their possibilities for participation determined by and their active presence interpreted through their gender” (p. 12). Women have been, and still are, significantly marginalised and sexualised in the gaming culture, both as players and characters (Apperley, 2022; Cote, 2018; Heritage, 2022; Kirkpatrick, 2016). Players who stream² also frequently report that they experience being harassed and stereotyped due to their gender (Nakandala et al., 2017; Ruvalcaba et al., 2018). Furthermore, women streamers are often judged by others on their appearances and labelled as

¹ A healer is a type of character class in video gaming designed around the restoration of allies’ health, known as healing, in order to delay or prevent their defeat.

² Streaming refers to the practice of broadcasting oneself via the internet whilst playing, so that other people can watch them on their computer, phone or games console.

“titty streamers”, thus excluding them from being “real” gamers (Ruberg et al., 2019). As a way of resisting the expectations they face and taking control of their own cultural agency, many women players reject the concept and identity of a gamer altogether (Butt, 2022; Friman, 2022). Consequently, scholars such as Butt (2022) and Friman (2022) argue that game culture has entered a post-gamer era, in which those who engage in it challenge its social order and practices and discover alternative meanings for their game cultural agency outside the traditional frames of gamer identity. While this may reduce some of the strain on women players, it is important to point out that rejecting the gamer identity does not get rid of the exclusionary systems and practices found in gaming culture as a whole (Friman, 2022).

Gender equity in media production and the representation of women in the media

As previously outlined in Chapter 1, the media is regarded as one of the most important areas for the global promotion of gender equality (Ross & Padovani, 2017), in that it significantly impacts how people view the world, themselves and others (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2009). According to Croteau and Hoynes (2019), the media has a long history of marginalising women. Although the impact of women’s rights movements has resulted in a greater diversity of portrayals and roles for women in the media in more recent years, inequality and marginalisation based on gender still persist (Croteau & Hoynes, 2019).

In terms of control of the creation and production of media content, men are far more likely to hold executive positions. According to the Women’s Media Center (2017), in 2017 women made up 33 percent of directors and 44 percent of personnel in the TV and radio industry, in newspaper newsrooms, women held 39 percent of executive roles and accounted for 39 percent of the personnel (ASNE, 2017) and in the film industry, women made up just 11 percent of directors, 11 percent of writers, 19

percent of executive producers, 16 percent of editors and 4 percent of cinematographers in the top 250 earning films in the US (Lauzen, 2020).

The content of the media and the ways in which people are portrayed by it also play an important role in how people interpret the social world (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2009). Media representations of women and men mirror and replicate a wide range of stereotyped gender roles (Croteau & Hoynes, 2019). Firstly, women are significantly underrepresented across a variety of media outlets (Desmond & Danilewicz, 2010; Gerbner & Signorielli, 1979; Hether & Murphy, 2010; Macharia, 2020). Second, when women are represented it is commonly in limited and marginalised ways. For example, they are frequently sexualised, usually by portraying them in scanty or provocative clothing (Turner, 2010; Kavanagh et al., 2019; Wright, 2009). Finally, women are often depicted in stereotypically feminine roles as non-professionals, housewives, spouses, mothers and sexual gatekeepers (Lauzen et al., 2008; Glascock, 2001; Sink & Mastro, 2017).

In the case of media coverage of women's sport, early research revealed that such coverage was minimal (Tuggle, 1997), and in the coverage that did exist women athletes were "likely to be trivialized, infantilized and sexualized" (Messner et al., 1993, p. 123) and represented as "sexual objects available for male consumption rather than as competitive athletes" (Schell, 1999). By the 2000s, more recent studies had found that although the quantity of media coverage of women's sport had not improved (Messner & Cooky, 2010), the nature and quality of it had changed. Trivialising, disparaging and sexualised portrayals of women's sport and women athletes were now scarce. Instead, a new approach for enticing male audiences emerged by focusing on women athletes as family members and highlighting their positions as mothers, wives or girlfriends (Messner & Cooky, 2010). In the 2010s, scholars argued that coverage developed further (Cooky et al., 2015; Cooky & Messner, 2018). According to Musto and colleagues (2017), this development was characterised by its "lackluster, matter-of-fact manner" (p. 590). That is, most of the coverage of women's sport lacked the

action-packed, witty language, rich praises and other prominent characteristics associated with that of men's sport (Musto et al., 2017). Similarly, Hovden and von der Lippe (2019) asserted that the stereotyping and trivialisation of women athletes in the sports media contributed to the portrayal of women as the 'other' and gendered. However, alternative discourses may provide more flexible and less hegemonic constructions of gender for future trends in the sports media (Hovden & von der Lippe, 2019).

Sport, social inclusion and gender

Sport is a site that is often highlighted and celebrated due to its presumed ability to reduce processes of social exclusion that occur in various aspects of life (Collins & Kay, 2014; Haudenhuyse & Theeboom, 2015; Kingsley & Spencer-Cavaliere, 2015). However, research suggests that sport remains a site of various and complex exclusionary processes, particularly as participants advance up the competitive pyramid (Donnelly & Coakley, 2002; Fasting & Sand, 2009; Kingsley et al., 2017; Spaaij et al., 2014). Furthermore, Hovden and Pfister (2006) argue that gender indicates a significant power relation in sport that tends to favour boys and men, in that sport is an institution that was developed by and for men. As a result of this unbalanced gendered power relationship, research has revealed the various ways in which girls and women have become socially excluded in the world of sport as athletes, coaches, leaders and fans (Appleby & Foster, 2013; Dietz et al., 2021; Elling & Knoppers, 2005; Fasting et al., 2004; Hovden, 2010, 2012; Hovden & Tjønnndal, 2017; Piggott & Matthews, 2020; Tjønnndal, 2019).

Elling and Claringbould maintain (2005) that sport participation and leadership are characterised by an overrepresentation of boys and men and that this is a result of social stereotypes and norms that determine legitimate bodies in sport (Elling & Claringbould, 2005; Frisby & Ponc, 2013). For instance, Vertinsky et al. (2009) detailed how women were not allowed to participate in the inaugural Olympics due to claims

that their bodies were fragile and concerns about harm to their reproductive functions. A recent example is the unsuccessful lawsuit filed by women ski jumpers to be included in the 2010 Olympic Winter Games, where some sport leaders used a similar logic combined with other justifications to defend women's exclusion in ski jumping (Vertinsky et al., 2009). Since women were initially allowed to compete as athletes at the 1900 Summer Olympic Games in Paris, the Olympic movement has succeeded in improving women's inclusion. In 2012, the London Summer Olympics achieved three significant milestones in terms of gender inclusion: 1) the London Games had the largest ratio of women athletes of any Summer Olympic Games, 2) every sport offered allowed the participation of women athletes and 3) all the participating countries in the Games allowed women athletes to compete (Donnelly & Donnelly, 2013). Despite these recent accomplishments, there is still a long way to go before women are equal to men in sport.

In terms of sports leadership positions, the proportion of women is low (Adriaanse & Claringbould, 2016; Burton, 2015; Hovden 2012; Gaston et al., 2020). Furthermore, a transformational change of sports organisations and progress towards increasing the inclusion of women in leadership roles are slow (Burton & Leberman, 2017; Burton et al., 2011; Piggott & Matthews, 2020). According to Adriaanse (2017), women chaired only 7 percent (5 of 70) of international sport federations in 2016. Moreover, in 2017 women only held 16.3 percent of directorships in international governing sport bodies (Adriaanse, 2017). As a result, gender balance in board composition, which is typically classified as 40-60 percent of either gender, is still a long way off. Similarly, research has also demonstrated how the field of coaching in sport is dominated by men and moulded by masculine associations and gender norms (Fasting & Pfister, 2000; Norman, 2008, 2010, 2012; Hovden & Tjørndal, 2017). Several studies highlight gender identity and sexual orientation as potential barriers to inclusion in sports environments (Anderson & Hargreaves, 2014; Kavoura & Kokkonen, 2020; Jones et al., 2017). For instance, in their systematic literature review relating to sport participation and

competitive sport policies, Jones et al. (2017) found that the lack of inclusive and comfortable environments was a primary barrier to the participation of transgender people. The review also found that transgender people had a mostly negative experience of competitive sports due to the restrictions that sport policies placed on them (Jones et al., 2017).

Sport video games

The SVG genre was one the first, and is now one of the most popular, video game genres. Somewhat paradoxically, the SVG genre has received limited scholarly focus and is one of the least popular branches of esports, despite its early development and general popularity amongst players. According to Ernest Adams (2006), “A sports game simulates some aspect of a real or imaginary athletic sport, whether it is playing in matches, managing a team or career, or both” (p. 482). This means that the SVG genre encompasses games that try to simulate real-life sports as accurately as possible, such as the FIFA, NBA 2K and Madden franchises, as well as more fantasy-based games that include only some elements of sport, like Mario Tennis or Rocket League. In the former, gameplay is a comprehensive simulation of the associated sport, often using licenced images, trademarks and the resemblance of real-life athletes (Mirabito & Kucek, 2019). On the other hand, a game like Rocket League is a “hybrid” game that uses concepts of racing and soccer whilst mirroring the gameplay objectives of the latter (Mirabito & Kucek, 2019).

According to Crawford (2015), SVG is one of the oldest video game genres. William Higinbotham’s Tennis for Two, a rudimentary tennis-inspired game developed at Brookhaven National Laboratory in the late 1950s, was one of the first video games to be created. While SVGs are not among the most popular esports genres, franchises like the FIFA soccer game series constitute one of the best-selling video game series of all time, with 325 million games copies sold (Batchelor, 2021). Other SVG franchises, such as Madden NFL (American football) and MLB: The Show (baseball), were top-selling

video games in 2021 (Statista, 2021). Despite the popularity of SVGs, the genre has been generally sidelined in terms of academic attention compared to other video game genres like first-person shooters (FPS) and massive multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG) (Crawford, 2015; Mirabito & Kucek, 2019). Some time ago, Leonard (2006) asserted that “the field of sports games studies represents a barren wasteland of knowledge” (p. 393). Over the last decade or two, gaming and esports research has grown and, as a result, several previously overlooked video game genres have become the subject of inquiry. However, compared to many other genres and facets of gaming, SVGs remain an under-researched genre of video games (Crawford, 2015; Mirabito & Kucek, 2019).

Consalvo et al. (2013) highlight a small group of scholars who were among the first to study and debate SVGs. One of these scholars, Crawford (2005a, 2005b), started with a focus on the connections between sports fan allegiances, involvement and playing sports-themed video games. His research subsequently shifted to the joys and practices of SVG players, specifically how players frequently utilise SVGs as a platform to create (life) narratives, both while playing and away from the game screen (Crawford, 2006, 2008; Crawford & Gosling, 2009). Consalvo et al. (2013) also emphasise David Leonard’s (2004, 2006) groundbreaking research on SVGs and identity, and particularly his assessment of the challenging nature of game character representations of ethnicity and race. Crawford (2015) was certain that Baerg’s (2007, 2008) work on SVG fans and the mediation of sporting bodies in SVGs should be included in overviews of early research on SVGs. *Sport Videogames*, edited by Mia Consalvo, Konstantin Mitgutsch and Abe Stein, became the first book about the SVG genre in 2013, and was quickly followed in 2014 by Robert Brookey’s and Tom Oates’ edited work called *Playing to Win: Sports, Video Games, and the Culture of Play*.

Despite these works, many aspects of SVGs remain significantly under-explored. A major concern with the convergence of gaming and traditional sports has been the pervasive lack of women represented as either players or game characters (Bailey et

al., 2021). Given the prevalence of explicit, subtle and veiled forms of sexism in both the sport and gaming industries, SVGs offer highly precarious environments for girls and women that have resulted in their limited inclusion as players, fans, game characters, employees and executives (Darvin & Sagas, 2017; Darvin et al., 2021; Robnett & John, 2020; Yee, 2017). Furthermore, the lack of representation of women in SVG environments as either players or game characters has contributed to the reinforcement of harmful differences between men's and women's sports that could result in limiting girls' and women's opportunities as athletes, coaches and leaders (Consalvo, 2013).

Gender is addressed to some extent in the edited collections on SVGs listed above. For instance, in Consalvo's (2013) investigation of the history of women in SVGs, she examines the position of women in the most popular SVGs and reveals the possibly sexist character of this market driven audience. Furthermore, the studies of Newman (2014), Oates (2014) and Vorhees (2014) investigate how masculinity is formed through new technology and in certain historical contexts, thereby necessitating the creation of new types of heroes to overcome the emerging challenges. More recently, Darvin et al. (2021) have explored SVG fans' attitudes and responses to the introduction of female game characters in the NBA2K20 basketball game. Despite the recent increase in works focusing on SVGs, the genre still remains under-researched, especially compared to other popular video game genres (Bogost, 2013; Crawford, 2015; Mirabito & Kucek, 2019). Against this background, the aim of this thesis is to contribute to a deeper understanding of SVGs with a particular emphasis on gendered issues and (in)equality in sports-themed esports as an intersecting environment of the media, sport and digital games.

Chapter summary

In this chapter I present three broad areas of research that are considered to be particularly relevant for the main research question of how gendered power relations

reflect gender (in)equality in sports-themed esports. These are: (1) digital games, (2) the media and (3) sports. Girls and women encounter specific stereotypes, biases and barriers in each of these areas. As esports is considered to be an intersectional point in these areas, the same stereotypes, biases and barriers that girls and women face in digital gaming, the media and sporting contexts may increase the likelihood of negative experiences and linkages in esports contexts. Therefore, the aim in the thesis is to build on research in these specific areas in order to promote a deeper, nuanced and novel understanding of how gendered power relations in sports-themed esports are reflected in research, sports policy, the media and audience perceptions. In the following, I present the theoretical foundation on which the thesis is based.

CHAPTER 3 – THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter I present the theoretical framework that is used in the thesis to analyse how gendered power relations reflect gender (in)equality in sports-themed esports. The theoretical foundation consists of a combination of the theoretical concept of hegemonic masculinity and poststructuralist theory. Although these theoretical perspectives share certain similarities, there are also important differences that need to be acknowledged when combining these concepts. In the following I explain how these theoretical perspectives have been used in this thesis by referring to Articles I, III and IV. I do not refer to Article II, because this is intended as an explorative and inductive study that does not make use of a given theoretical perspective. In this chapter, I present each theoretical framework individually, before in the final part discussing some of the advantages and challenges of combining them.

Hegemonic masculinity

Since the late 1980s, the concept of hegemonic masculinity, as promoted by Raewyn Connell and colleagues (Carrigan et al., 1987; Connell, 1987, 1990, 1995, 2002), has served as a key framework for investigations into the intricacies of masculinities, sport and gender dynamics (Pringle, 2005). The concept draws on Gramscian (1971) ideas about how structural patterns of domination are perpetuated in society - not by force but through mutual consent between dominant and marginal groups (Markula, 2009). Connell (2001) defines hegemonic masculinity as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (p. 38). Furthermore, Connell (1995) argues that gender must be understood and analysed in a certain historical context. As part of this perspective on gender, she highlights the necessity of examining specific institutions. Connell (1995) argues that the structure of institutional sport supports particular social relations: male competitiveness and hierarchy, and female exclusion and

subordination. These social relations are manifested and reflected in physical performances. As a result, Connell (1995) asserts that “men’s greater sporting prowess has become a theme of backlash against feminism. It serves as symbolic proof of men’s superiority and right to rule” (p. 54). Instead of depending on essentialist understandings of gender, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) also assert that “Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting” (p. 836). As such, Connell (1995) provides a dynamic model of masculinity that is consistent with the work of feminist scholars offering similar nuanced models of situated gender construction and performance (see Butler, 2006; Weedon, 1997).

In her groundbreaking work on the professionalisation of computer gaming, Taylor (2012) argues that the concept of hegemonic masculinity allows scholars to think about a more dynamic process of gender construction, while also helping to comprehend the double-sided nature of masculinity in gaming culture. This is because hegemonic masculinity does not only exist in connection with femininity, but also with different types of masculinity that are circumstantially and historically positioned, stratified and frequently contested (Taylor, 2012; Witkowski, 2013). Taylor (2012) views the status of masculinity in esports environments as a struggle between geek masculinity and athletic masculinity. This entails that players’ identities are divided between traditions of geeky passion for gaming and more athletic traditions that emphasise competitiveness and sporting prowess. Each of these positions indicates a somewhat different stance towards hegemonic masculinity. These positions also change as esports becomes increasingly accepted in larger society as a leisure activity for both men and women (Taylor, 2012; Witkowski, 2013). Constructions of gender identity in esports environments also differ significantly across game titles, platforms, competition formats, locations and cultures (Taylor, 2012). Given the complicated and complex status of masculinity in esports environments, understanding gender as a dynamic, fluid and evolving process helps us to situate the construction of gender

identity in gaming culture in a larger discussion that not only includes traditional forms of masculinity, but also femininity (Butler, 2006; Taylor, 2012).

The concept of hegemonic masculinity has quickly become one of the most utilised theoretical perspectives in research on gender and esports and is therefore used in the review of research on gender and esports in Article I. However, several researchers argue that Connell's original concept lacks an appropriate conception of hegemonic femininity and multiple femininities (Paechter, 2018; Schippers, 2007). As a result, Article I adopts the alternative interpretation of hegemonic masculinity provided by Mimi Schippers (2007), which places the relationality of masculinity and femininity at the centre of understandings about the legitimacy of gender hegemony. Drawing on Butler (2006), Schippers (2007) argues that "heterosexual desire, as a defining feature for both women and men, is what binds the masculine and feminine in a binary, hierarchical relationship" (p. 90). Based on this naturalisation of male sexual dominance, Schippers (2007) proposes an alternative model of hegemonic masculinity that seeks to reintroduce femininity into the theory while retaining Connell's essential understanding of hegemonic masculinity. Schippers thus rephrases and expands Connell's (2001) definition (changes in italics) as follows: "Hegemonic masculinity is the *qualities defined as manly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to femininity* and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (p. 94). Based on this alternative model, Article I examines masculinity and femininity and their role in gender hegemony in esports environments by focusing on relationality. The emphasis here is not on identifying and describing the behaviour of men and women, but on the power relations and allocation of resources amongst men and women, and how masculinity and femininity as meaning networks legitimise and sustain that structure (Schippers, 2007).

Poststructuralist feminist theory

While poststructuralism is not a unified theoretical concept, it has generally been considered to consist of different theoretical perspectives, such as Lacanian psychoanalysis, Derridean deconstruction, Deleuzian rhizomatics and Foucauldian discourse theory (Markula, 2009). The poststructuralist perspective used in the articles of this thesis is based on poststructuralist feminist theories, in this instance drawn from Butler (2006, 2011), Foucault (1972, 1977, 1978) and Weedon (1997). Although feminist sport media research based on poststructuralist perspectives is still in its infancy, there are some examples of how perspectives like Foucauldian discourse theory could be applied in order to understand media portrayals of women in sport (Barker-Ruchti, 2009; Harrison, 2018; MacKay & Dallaire, 2013; Thorpe, 2008). For instance, Holly Thorpe (2008) accounts for how Foucault's conception of power allows for an assessment of the prosaic and everyday ways in which power is performed and disputed in snowboarding culture by analysing the relationship between young women snowboarders and the media.

Article III in this thesis uses Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) to explore the underlying interpretations and power relations related to the media coverage of Chiquita Evans when she became the first woman to compete in the NBA 2K League. Foucault's theory of discourse (1972, 1978) offers an understanding of language and social power that encompasses the poststructuralist concept of subjectivity. The term subjectivity refers to a person's conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions, as well as their sense of self identity and ways of relating to their social position (Weedon, 1997). Poststructuralism implies a dynamic, complex and ever-changing subjectivity that is constantly formed and reformed through language and discourse (Foucault, 1972; Weedon, 1997). FDA considers the institutional influence of discourse and how it forms and control individual subjects (Weedon, 1997). Discourse, according to Foucault, refers to:

ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the 'nature' of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern. (Weedon, 1997, p. 105)

Foucault (1972, 1978) focuses on how some discourses have formed and established structures of meaning that have achieved the status of 'truth' and that influence how we view ourselves and others and how we organise society, while other alternative discourses are overlooked and oppressed yet potentially provide sites in which hegemonic practices can be questioned, refuted and 'resisted'. According to Foucault (1972, 1978), there is no set or final organisation of social identity or practices. Rather, the construction of identities and behaviours are linked to, or influenced by, historically specific discourses. The capacity of discourses to shape individuals' minds and bodies is intricately linked to a broader network of power relations, often with institutional underpinnings (Weedon, 1997). Foucault (1978) used the term subject position to describe how individuals are positioned in social hierarchies, focusing on the relationship between discourse and power. Subject position explains an individual's place in the prevailing discourses, in that it shapes their beliefs, feelings and behaviour and provides multiple options and constraints for action (Weedon, 1997).

The nature of femininity and masculinity constitutes a significant site of discursive struggle, where a conventional gendered understanding of social practices strives to define certain forms of masculinity and femininity as natural (Weedon, 1997). In this vein, feminist theorists like Butler (2006, 2011) and Weedon (1997) have demonstrated how Foucault's theory of discourse can be appropriated to understand how women commonly become tools of their own oppression by (intentionally or unintentionally) restricting themselves to the dominant binary gendered logic. Widely accepted notions of ideal appearances and practices, normative beliefs encompassing either

approval or punishment depending on compliance to them, specific definitions of joy that are viewed as appropriate and suggest ways of being a woman, and the limited possibility of negotiating gender within certain discourses all contribute to the formation of gendered subject positions (Butler, 2006; Foucault, 1978; Weedon, 1997). For instance, when Chiquita Evans defied stereotypical notions of esports as a masculine domain by becoming the first woman player in the NBA 2K League, the examination of her experiences in Article III reveals negative consequences in the form of harassment, sexism and exclusion from competitive play. In Article III, this poststructuralist feminist framework is used to analyse how dominant discourses and cultural stereotypes influence the construction and negotiation of Evans' identity in the media coverage of her.

In Article IV, the theoretical framework is based specifically on Butler's (2006, 2009) theoretical concepts of performativity and precarity. Continuing Foucault's line of interrogating the way in which institutional discourses influence how individuals think about themselves as subjects, Butler (2006) claims that identity is a performance and describes performativity as "that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains" (p. xii). According to Butler (Ibid.), gender is something that one does, rather than something that one is. The concept of precarity is closely linked to performativity and relates to how identities have to be performed in intelligible ways in order for others to read and recognise them (Butler, 2009). In her work on players identification with video game characters, Adrienne Shaw (2015) suggests that this process is closely linked to media representations and the ways in which players identify with them. According to Shaw, precarity allows for a politics of representation that favours the margins rather than reconceiving the core. Therefore, the concepts of precarity and performativity can help scholars to understand how media representations allow particular identities to become conceivable, plausible and liveable. Against this background, these concepts are used in the analysis of SVG players' perceptions of gendered character representations in Article IV, in an attempt

to explain the clear gendered pattern that is identified in the study and which indicates that women players have clear and strong opinions about female characters in SVGs.

Actualising gender and embodiment in digital space

The use of a poststructuralist feminist theoretical framework has the advantage of being closely related to understandings of online embodiment and how the physical bodies of players are always reintroduced and rendered meaningful in virtual competition contexts. Although I did not apply the perspective of online embodiment directly in the articles, I have highlighted this concept in the discussion of my findings in this summary text (see Chapter 6). This enables me to consider how gender matters, even in virtual and non-physical contexts such as esports. In a sports context, esports is commonly regarded as a disembodied activity in which the physical bodies of the players play a minimal role. Ten years ago, Taylor (2012) pointed out that esports practices that are experienced by players as *embodied subjects* are still understudied topics, despite the rapidly growing field of esports research. Today, we still only have a limited understanding of the level of bodily involvement that esports participation may entail (Ekdahl, 2021). Instead, esports has often been perceived as an essentially disembodied activity (Holt, 2016), physically indirect (Parry, 2018) and, as the modern-day equivalent of chess, an activity that is assessed without any consideration of the body at all (Pluss et al., 2019).

As a result, such perceptions of esports have led to a common understanding in many areas of research and also in society at large of esports as an activity with only a bare minimum of bodily involvement, for instance by referring to the players' manipulation of gaming equipment (Ekdahl, 2021). Due to the perceived low degree of physical engagement, this view has fostered favourable perceptions of esports as a new form of sport that may have significant potential in terms of providing an equal playing field for both men and women. However, the challenge with this view is that it ignores the players' actual lived experiences and their interactions with the virtual worlds in which they compete (Ekdahl, 2021). Therefore, I contend that in order to fully address how

participation and equality in esports may align or compare with traditional sports, it is important to consider what it actually means to participate in esports and how the physical body may be fundamental to esports performances.

The idea of online embodiment is closely linked to feminist notions of performance, performativity and positionality (Bromseth & Sundén, 2011; Sundén & Svenningsson, 2011). In this vein, we may view gender as a partly “virtual” phenomenon constituted by a range of events, affects, norms and practices that are continually brought into existence through material-discursive practices (Van Doorn, 2011). Similarly, embodiment may be considered to involve a critical virtual component, since the experience of one’s own physical body is dependent on a variety of incorporeal (e.g., psychological, cultural, artistic and spiritual) practices and therefore cannot be situated within a fixed “natural” body (Colebrook, 2000; Lim & Browne, 2009). Instead, as Butler’s (2011) theory of gender performativity also contends, embodiment constantly transcends the body and is never entirely bound to it.

In the thesis, online embodiment is examined through the lens of play and performance, which involves the various ways in which the body is produced, reproduced and recognised in online environments through images, texts and sounds (Bromseth & Sundén, 2011; Sundén, 2003). It also highlights the corporeal situatedness of players and, perhaps most thought-provokingly, how issues of online embodiment illustrate the many connections and possible disconnections between a player’s physical body and the onscreen virtual representation of it (Bromseth & Sundén, 2011). Following a critical approach to internet practices (Silver & Massanari, 2006), Bromseth and Sundén (2011) argue that it is important to address whether and how online bodies are separated from dominant gender discourses or from the physical bodies of the players. At the same time, esports can also be seen as a practice that could open a new window into a novel and possibly deeper understanding of the *potential* role and position of embodiment in online gaming practices (Ekdahl, 2021). According to Bromseth and Sundén (2011), it is therefore important, from a feminist point of view,

to seriously consider the potential of online environments as suggested by early cyberfeminist research and emphasise the disruptive potential of online environments that may have real feminist promise.

Combining hegemonic masculinity and feminist poststructuralist theory

Connell's theoretical concept of hegemonic masculinity, as rephrased and elaborated by Schippers (2007), serves as the theoretical starting point in the first article of the thesis. This article consists of a review of the existing research on esports and gender. Hegemonic masculinity has served as the dominating paradigm for investigations into the intricacies of masculinities, sport and gender dynamics and has aided the development of important criticisms of male-dominated sports, as well as the misogynistic and violent cultures that surround them (Anderson, 2015; Davis, 2016; MacDonald, 2014). As previously outlined, Taylor (2012) suggests that Connell's (2001) conceptualisation of hegemonic masculinity provides a valuable and dynamic understanding of the construction of gender in esports environments which, according to Taylor (2012), is characterised by the duality between geek masculinity and athletic masculinity. Connell's (2001) dynamic understanding of masculinity facilitates an understanding of gender as a shifting, complex and evolving process that allows researchers to locate gendered esports identities in broader discussions involving various forms of masculinity and femininity (Butler, 2006; Taylor, 2012). As a result, several scholars have discussed some of the elements of hegemonic masculinity encountered in esports research (Darvin et al., 2020; Darvin et al., 2021; Ruotsalainen & Friman, 2018; Taylor, 2015; Taylor & Witkowski, 2010; Witkowski, 2013). Given the strength, relevance and extensive use of the concept of hegemonic masculinity in esports contexts, this was considered to be the most appropriate theoretical framework for Article I, which examines how gender relations and the relevance and problematic linkages between esports, masculinities and gender relations have been treated in previous research literature.

Although many researchers have successfully used the concept of hegemonic masculinity to provide important criticisms of male-dominated sports and the hostile environments that often surround them, I support the view that the continued dominance of hegemonic masculinity may not be entirely fruitful for future studies of the links between masculinities and sport (Pringle, 2005; Rowe, 1998). A major concern about the continued use of this concept is related to the risk of conceiving and portraying connections between sport and masculinity in one specific way (Pringle, 2005). Although the concept of hegemonic masculinity has provided a valuable dynamic model for understanding gender construction and the double-sided status of masculinity in esports contexts (Taylor, 2012), my suggestion is to expand this dynamic understanding with more nuanced models of situated gender construction and performance, as proposed by Butler (2006, 2009), Foucault (1972, 1978) and Weedon (1997), in order to avoid redundancy and repetition when conducting new research on the intricate articulations between sports and esports, gender identity and power dynamics (Pringle, 2005).

However, it is important to acknowledge foundational theoretical differences when combining the concept of hegemonic masculinity with poststructuralist theory (Pringle, 2005). Put simply, Gramsci (1971) connects the working of power to dominant group(s), while Foucault links these workings to discourses that are not produced or controlled by certain groups of people. Foucault envisions systems of truth without a ruler but asserts that each discourse has a distinct history and that the influence of each discourse is maintained by distinctive social processes or practices (Pringle, 2005). Regardless of these distinctions, studies of sport through the lens of both Foucauldian and hegemonic theory commonly see sport as a masculinising practice that structures knowledge about bodies and forms power relations between multiple 'subjects' (Markula & Pringle, 2006). As a result, I decided to use feminist poststructuralist theory as a theoretical lens in Articles III and IV as an approach to advance reflection, discussion and understanding in order to inspire new perspectives of esports and

gender identity. Turning from a hegemonic masculinity perspective in Article I to a poststructuralist feminist perspective in Articles III and IV may also open up a discussion about how conclusions drawing on hegemony theory both inform and limit ways of understanding esports and gender. More specifically, in Article III I turn to poststructuralist theories drawn from Butler (2006, 2009), Foucault (1972, 1978) and Weedon (1997) to provide an account of the complex and ambiguous articulations and power dynamics at work in sports-themed esports, such as when Chiquita Evans became the first woman player in the NBA 2K League and how the media representations of her reflected the identity negotiation of women esports players. In Article IV, I draw on Butler's (2006, 2009) concepts of performativity and precarity in an attempt to argue for the importance of female game character representations in SVGs that go beyond a reconstruction of who is identified as a profitable audience.

Chapter summary

In this chapter I present the theoretical framework that is used to analyse how gendered relations reflect gender (in)equality in sports-themed esports. To summarise, the theoretical foundation consists of a combination of the theoretical concepts of hegemonic masculinity and poststructuralist theory. Throughout the chapter I explain how these theoretical perspectives have been used in the thesis by referring to Articles I, III and IV. Furthermore, I discuss the important similarities and differences between these theoretical perspectives that need to be addressed when combining these concepts. The aim of this theoretical foundation is to provide a nuanced perspective on the experiences of women players and highlight gendered issues and barriers in sports-themed esports. In the following chapter I present the methodological approaches and considerations of the thesis.

CHAPTER 4 – PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES

In this chapter I explain the methodological approaches and considerations of the thesis. First, I describe my position within the philosophy of science, namely social constructivism. Second, I outline my researcher positionality in relation to the study as a whole. Thereby, I provide an explanation of the overall research design of the thesis that is used to examine the main research question about how gendered power relations reflect gender (in)equality in sports-themed esports. This is followed by more detailed descriptions of the methodological choices in each of the research articles. In the final section, I discuss some of the ethical considerations of the research project.

A social constructivist approach toward esports as mediatisation

All parts of the research process, including the development of research questions, ethical considerations, methodological choices and assessment of research quality are guided by paradigms within the philosophy of science (Markula & Silk, 2011). In view of this, it is important to be aware of which philosophical assumptions underpin a given research project. In the following, I describe this project's background within the philosophy of science, which is based on a social constructivist approach. In the philosophy of science, the social constructivist approach is primarily associated with qualitative studies (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). As Article IV is based on a quantitative design, this part of the thesis can easily be seen as related to other approaches within the philosophy of science, such as positivism and pragmatism. Nevertheless, I consider myself as a social constructivist in my way of thinking and conducting research. This is also reflected in the methodological approaches used, in that the majority of the articles in this thesis are based on qualitative designs.

The essential idea of social constructivism is that social reality is constructed and reconstructed through individuals' practices and interactions with others (Berger & Luckmann, 2000). That is, ideas and concepts, organisations and institutions are social

creations, although they often appear as 'objective' truths. In this way, social constructivist perspectives may be used to challenge taken-for-granted ideas and social conditions that are in fact alterable social constructs (Burr, 2003). This is an important point in this project, given that male dominance in esports is not interpreted as a result of inherent biological differences between men and women, but rather as results of social constructions and re-constructions that occur through social institutions, practices and interactions between individuals. Social constructivism is a paradigm that is connected to several academic fields and influenced by various research traditions, such as phenomenology, poststructuralism and social psychology (Rasborg, 2007; Stam, 2001). As various approaches to social constructivism have emerged in different fields, it is difficult to provide a collective definition of this paradigm (Kukla, 2000). However, most social constructivist approaches have some basic features in common in terms of ontology, epistemology and methodology.

Focusing on the ontological context of the thesis first, Frandsen (2020) suggests that the integration of esports into the organisational frameworks of traditional sport can be interpreted as an emergent process of mediatisation, which broadly refers to how media impacts or interacts with other social institutions. According to Frandsen, social constructivist approaches to mediatisation share some distinct ontological features, and that researchers using social constructivist approaches in this context agree that communication is a core component in the construction of people's identities and social realities, which also serves as the point of departure and focus of interest for such approaches.

Frandsen (2020) further maintains that social constructivist approaches to mediatisation emphasise profound sociological examinations of how people use communication to construct their everyday social reality. This emphasis on communicative practices mirrors certain sociological and anthropological understandings of communication and sport as communicative ritual events (Birrell, 1981), or, more broadly, as a communication concept (Rothenbuhler, 1998). In the

context of esports, these understandings shape the media as a fundamentally communicative social domain with its own norms and values that are reflected through players, contests and their communication structures (Frandsen, 2020). Such communication structures are interpreted as sub-processes or practices of mediatisation. In esports settings, this may include “eventisation” (turning something into an event; Hepp, 2012, p. 9), “personalisation” (tailoring a product to accommodate certain individuals; Driessens et al., 2010, p. 315) and “sportification” (organising a non-sporting activity in a way that resembles sport; Frandsen, 2020, p. 20).

The third and final ontological feature of social constructivist approaches to mediatisation that Frandsen (2020) highlights relates to the frequent use of a bottom-up, user-centred and/or everyday approach to understanding mediatisation. Although this brings social constructivist approaches to mediatisation closer to ethnographical-based approaches to media audience research, the focus here is not primarily on examining individuals as media users or audiences. Rather, the thesis as a whole highlights how women esports participants and their social role and conditions as players in a highly masculine esports culture are reflected. Using a social constructivist approach to mediatisation is therefore intended to highlight the changes formed by integrating mediated communication in certain interactions and activities that make up “part-time realities”, “small life-worlds” or “social worlds” (concepts from Hitzler & Honer, 1984; Luckmann, 1970; and Shibutani, 1955, introduced in Hepp, 2013a, 2013b).

Further, these ontological assumptions provide guidelines for how knowledge can be acquired (epistemology) and the kind of techniques for data collection and analysis that should be used (methodology; Silkoset et al., 2021). The social constructivist paradigm is characterised by a subjective epistemology (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), which entails knowledge being viewed as subjective and acquirable through interaction and reflection (Silkoset et al., 2021). Researchers should attempt to interpret and

understand how different people perceive a phenomenon. It is also important to acknowledge that what is being examined is not independent of the researcher doing the examination (Silkose et al., 2021). On a more specific level, this connects to the term methodology, which describes how to combine various approaches and techniques in a situation. Social constructivist approaches often relate to a hermeneutic methodology, which means that research results are produced through interactions between researchers and research objects (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Moreover, Burr (2003) argues that language is a core component in the socially constructed experiences that constitute people's identities. This has resulted in a tendency to use qualitative techniques of inquiry, which are typically suited to obtaining linguistic and textual data and are seen to be less prone to decontextualising respondents' experiences and perceptions (Burr, 2003). The obtained data is then often analysed using textual approaches, such as discourse analysis (see Potter, 1996).

The described epistemological and methodological positions are fruitful for the scientific work behind the articles of this thesis. Articles I, II and III are all based on qualitative research designs that closely consider how language and discourses play a key role in the social construction of women esports players' identities. In this thesis, knowledge has been formed by the interactions between me as a researcher and the data material through the analysis of research texts (Article I), sport policy documents (Article II), media texts (Article III) and survey results (Article IV). Articles I and II are based on qualitative text analyses in order to discern how women esports players' experiences and spaces of opportunity are understood from a research- (Article I) and sports policy (Article II) perspective. Article III is based on a Foucauldian discourse analysis that uses a feminist poststructuralist theoretical framework to examine how a certain woman esports player has been constructed in the media's coverage of her. These approaches are closely connected to social constructivism by the linguistic and textual focus (Burr, 2003). Article IV is based on a quantitative research design, which is often associated with other perspectives within the philosophy of science, such as

positivism and post-positivism (Silkose et al., 2021). However, a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods may still be used in social constructivist research (Burr, 2003). Moreover, the theoretical framework used to analyse the survey results is based on feminist poststructuralist theory, which as mentioned above, is closely connected to social constructionism. As Gergen (1999) contends, it is not quantitative approaches themselves, but the universalistic truth claims that often follow these approaches that are incompatible with social constructionism. In the following sections I first present an account of my positionality as a researcher before moving on to the overall research design and strategy of the thesis.

Researcher positionality

Building on a social constructivist perspective, I understand knowledge as something that is produced in an interactive process between the researcher and the research objects (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). As a white male researcher, my researcher positionality is that of an “outsider”, particularly in terms of identity markers such as gender, ethnicity and playing experience in esports. The issue of the researcher as an outsider or insider to the population being researched has been increasingly explored in social research (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009), with each position having methodological strengths and weaknesses. Being an outsider has allowed me to distance myself as a researcher and to position the individuals featured in my data material as the experts (Kerrick & Henry, 2017; Ryba & Wright, 2010; Woodward, 2008) on what it is like to be a woman esports player. Moreover, this position has helped me see the research field from new and critical perspectives that researchers in insider positions may take for granted, as acts of symbolic violence toward women are often normalised in male dominated environments (Haavind, 2000).

On the other hand, the outsider position also entails challenges for me as a researcher, particularly in terms of understanding the experiences of women esports players. According to Beauvoir (2014), human experience is clearly limited by the physical body.

This means that as a white male researcher I cannot claim to “understand” what it is like to be a woman in an esports context because I cannot experience this through my male body. Having said that, it is possible for male researchers to study gendered meanings and the social significance of gender (Haavind, 2000). Even though women researchers have been particularly concerned about highlighting the significance of gender with a view to understanding its social realities and people’s participation in it, which is also the case in gaming and esports research, this is not a result of them somehow being more able to study other women (Haavind, 2000). Rather, they have been able to sense that there is something not quite right when it comes to intersubjectivity within the research community (Haavind, 2000). From this position, many women researchers encourage the development and adjustment of research practices and knowledge accumulation in their fields of research, which should ideally also include male researchers (Haavind, 2000). As the overall esports research field is as yet dominated by male researchers, the focus on women and femininity remains limited (Ruotsalainen, 2022). Therefore, it is necessary for male researchers to engage in such a development and work to move this research forward. As such, male researchers could help to play a key role as “change agents” (Hovden et al., 2020, p. 223) in the advancement of a more inclusive esports research.

Research design and strategy

The overall research design of this thesis is one of mixed methods. More specifically, this is the type of design that Creswell et al. (2003) refer to as a triangulation design, which is the most common and well-known approach to mixing methods. The purpose of this design is “to obtain different but complementary data on the same topic” (Morse, 1991, p. 122). Moreover, this design is often chosen in order to combine the varying strengths and non-overlying weaknesses of qualitative designs (small sample sizes, nuances, in depth) with those of quantitative designs (large sample sizes, patterns, generalisation) (Patton, 2002). In this model, qualitative and quantitative data is collected and analysed independently, before the different findings are

converged by bringing the separate results together in the interpretation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The objective of this design is to arrive at reliable and well-supported conclusions about a specific phenomenon (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

The mixed methods research strategy utilised in this thesis is based on the idea that comprehending the media-sport influence in society requires knowledge from several perspectives (Jhally, 1989; Wenner, 1989). Subsequently, sport media scholars like Jhally (1989) and Wenner (1989) suggest that such studies must be assessed as transactions between four different systems: 1) the sports media production complex, 2) the mediated sport content, 3) audience interpretations and 4) social relations. As a result, various perspectives related to each of these systems are therefore needed in order to produce an accurate understanding of the relationship between the media and sport in society. Following Jhally (1989) and Wenner (1989), the four articles of this thesis address gender inequality in the context of each of these four systems:

The first point of interest regarding the sports media production complex refers to sport and media organisations and professionals that aim to captivate audiences. Here, the focus is on examining the workings, motives and interrelationships of these organisations, which provide one part of the picture of the media and sports relationship in society (Jhally, 1989; Wenner, 1989). This is the primary focus of Article II, which uses a qualitative document analysis to analyse the IOC's strategy to include esports in the Olympic Games from a gender perspective.

Secondly, Jhally (1989) and Wenner (1989) argue that it is important to consider the actual content of mediated sports and how it can influence audiences and society overall. Jhally (1989) contends that the meaning of mediated sport content is not formed by coincidence, but rather as the result of a complex interplay of technological, organisational, economic, cultural, political and social aspects. Therefore, critical examinations of media content are necessary in order to reveal covert structures, content characteristics and signposts of cultural significance (Jhally, 1989; Wenner,

1989). This is the main focus of Article III, which critically examines the media's construction of Chiquita Evans as the first woman player in the NBA 2K League using a Foucauldian discourse analysis.

Thirdly, it is also important to consider how sports media content is perceived by readers, as we cannot simply assume this from our own readings (Jhally, 1989; Wenner, 1989). Members of the audience may interpret mediated sport content differently depending on their own perspectives, and the appeal of such content may vary significantly among different members of the audience (Wenner, 1989). As a result, Article IV makes use of an online survey to explore how representations of women as game characters are perceived by players. Although qualitative designs can be used for the basis of audience studies, I have chosen a quantitative design for this study in order to produce an account of how representations of women as game characters are perceived across a wider range of esports players.

In the fourth and final point concerning social relations, all these examinations of the production complex, media content and audience readings must be included and contextualised within the larger context of social life and the challenges and opportunities imposed by larger, social, cultural, political and economic trends (Jhally, 1989; Wenner, 1989). Specifically in terms of gender issues, Jhally (1989) contends that researchers must assess why sport has become understood in society in an almost entirely masculine fashion (Jhally, 1989). Similarly, in Article I I discuss why this is also the case in the virtual nature of esports. Furthermore, the aim of this summary text is to discuss and contextualise the individual findings of each of the articles within a broader frame of society. Overall, the aim of the articles is to demonstrate how gendered power relations reflect gendered (in)equalities in the various areas of the sports/media complex that sports-themed esports constitute. The research design can be illustrated as follows:

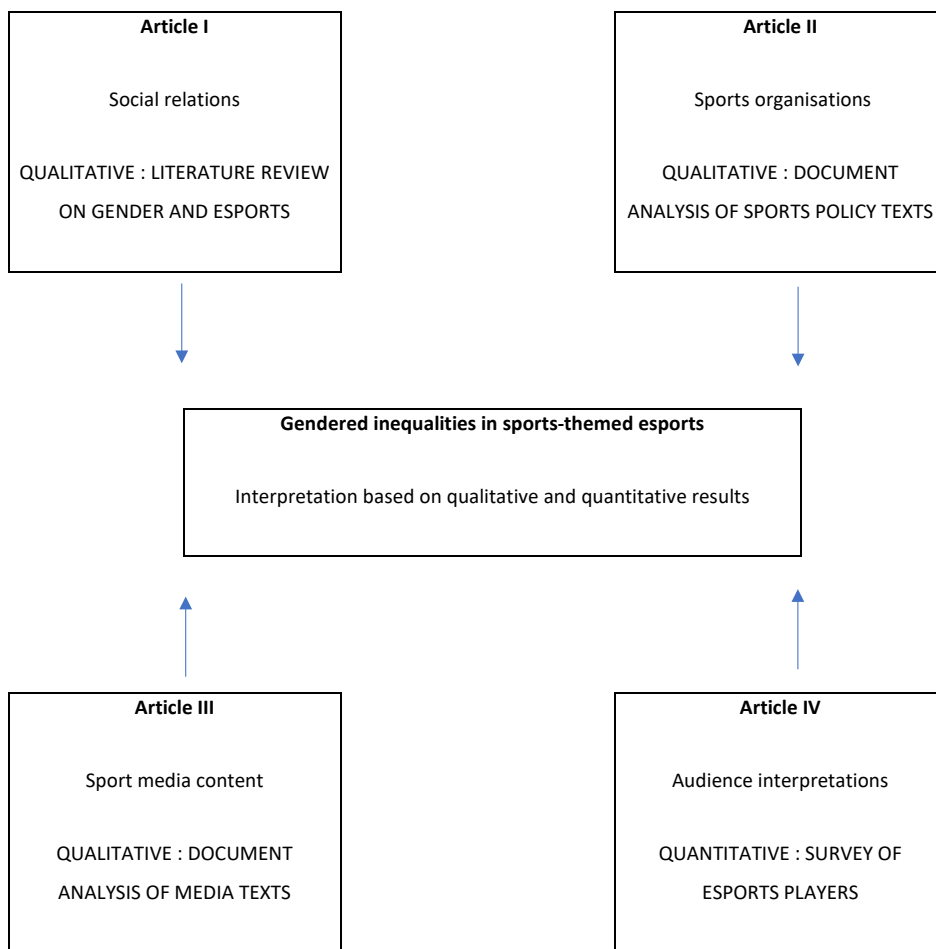


Figure 1. Research design of the thesis: Triangulation design

The impact of the coronavirus situation on the research project

For most of the research project period many national and international communities were partially or completely shut down due to the social restrictions and lockdowns related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the strict and uncertain social restrictions that limited travel opportunities and physical encounters with people, I was repeatedly forced to change and adjust my research project as a result of postponed or cancelled events in which I had planned to conduct observational and interview studies of esports players and stakeholders. With the benefit of hindsight, there may have been

opportunities for travel and in-person observations and interviews that could have enabled me to better address the situated knowledge of women in the field in this research project. Moreover, I could have been more aware of opportunities to conduct online observations and interviews, given that it became more commonplace to organise events in this way. On the other hand, it was difficult to predict when such periods might occur, how long they might last and which events could best be organised online. Thus, in order to complete the research project in the timeframe of the PhD contract with the university, I decided to base most of my articles on textual sources. At the same time, I attempted to gather first-hand information about players' opinions and perceptions through the online survey in Article IV. However, in an ideal world I would have preferred to conduct more qualitative interviews.

In the remainder of this chapter I provide more detailed descriptions of the methodological frameworks and considerations in each individual article. These include literature review methods, document analysis methods and survey methods.

Literature review

Article I is based on a literature review of previous research on gender and esports. This article addresses the main research question of how gendered power relations reflect gender (in)equality in sports-themed esports by providing an account of how this topic is understood in the existing research on gender and esports. As hegemonic masculinity is the most used theoretical perspective in the reviewed articles, it serves as the starting point for this article's research question. More specifically, a traditional narrative review approach is used to discuss the following research question: "How is the theoretical concept of hegemonic masculinity used in the literature to understand gendered power inequalities in esports?"

Traditional narrative review and sample

A literature review is a desk-based research approach in which the researcher uses secondary sources to critically summarise and assess what is already known about a

topic (Jesson et al., 2011). The literature review approach used in Article I is often referred to as a traditional narrative review (Torgerson, 2003), simply because it is presented in a narrative form. Traditional narrative reviews often take a critical approach and assess theories by critically examining the findings of previous research (Jesson et al., 2011). Thus, this approach provides scope for reflection on the existing literature, the exploration of issues and identifying research gaps (Jesson et al., 2011). In order to explore how many esports environments have become shaped by notions of hegemonic masculinity dominating other sporting contexts, despite the non-physical nature of esports, I use a traditional narrative review approach in Article I to assess how the theoretical concept of hegemonic masculinity has been used in literature to understand gendered inequalities in esports.

In traditional narrative reviews, the selection of literature is mainly based on locating information that addresses the research question(s) of the study (Machi & McEvoy, 2021). Based on the aim in Article I to assess how the theoretical concept of hegemonic masculinity has been used in esports research, I developed a set of keywords that was used in various combinations to identify relevant studies of esports and gender: esports, competitive gaming/video games, electronic/virtual/digital sports, gender, male/female/men/women/boys/girls, masculinity and femininity. The following search was conducted in Google Scholar, EBSCOhost, Scopus and Web of Science. The search was limited to peer-reviewed papers and research anthologies and PhD dissertations published in English and Scandinavian languages between 2006³ and 2020. The search was conducted between January 2020 and May 2020.

The initial search provided a sample of 5,967 articles, although most of these did not primarily focus on esports and gender as the major topics of research. In order to narrow the initial sample down to papers that exclusively focused on gender and esports, an exclusion process was carried out by reading through the literature,

³ The year of the earliest identified study in this search

skimming potential work for content and mapping suitable works for inclusion in the study (Machi & McEvoy, 2021). This involved the exclusion of papers consisting of reviews⁴, citations and conference proceedings. Papers that solely mentioned esports and gender without examining them as their research objectives, and papers that contained a mix of esports and other games, were also excluded. The final selection of literature resulted in a sample of 21 papers. The selection process leading to this final selection is illustrated in Figure 2:

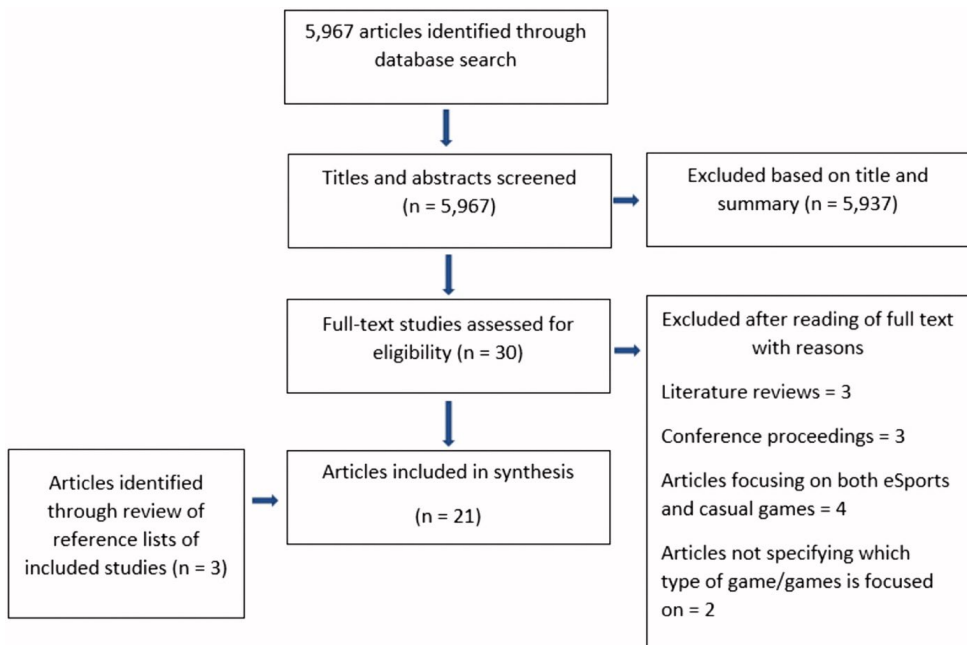


Figure 2. Selection of studies, Article 1

Analytical approach

Bryman (2016) describes narrative literature reviews as aiming to provide an overview of a research topic by conducting a relatively comprehensive examination and critical analysis of previous research, commonly as preparatory work before conducting one's

⁴ Relevant studies from other types of reviews were read and assessed separately.

own research in the field. The reason for doing a traditional narrative review in Article I was to address the concept of hegemonic masculinity as one of the primary theoretical perspectives used in research on gender and esports. Moreover, I aimed to establish a knowledge foundation for determining the contribution of the remaining articles in this thesis by mapping major questions, issues and debates that have been addressed to date, and how knowledge has been structured and organised in the field (Bryman, 2016; Hart, 1998).

The first step of the analysis in Article I involved using a thematic analysis to identify the recurring themes in the assessed literature (Ryan & Bernhard, 2003). This process led to the construction of three primary themes: 1) masculinities in esports, 2) online harassment and 3) negotiating gendered expectations. The papers were categorised into one of these themes based on their primary focus, which was determined by assessing their titles, abstracts and keywords. Theoretical assessments of masculinities in esports contexts, including the various types of masculinities and femininities found in esports environments, were categorised as “masculinities in esports”. Papers relating to negative online experiences with gender stereotyping and gender-based harassment in esports environments were categorised as “online harassment”. Finally, papers focusing on the broad and intricate variety of gendered expectations, identities, performances and differences in esports were categorised as “negotiating gendered expectations”.

Limitations and critique of traditional narrative review methods

In comparison to other literature review methods, such as scoping reviews or systematic literature reviews, critics of traditional narrative reviews argue that this type of literature review contains no formal methodology and that descriptions of how the review has been conducted are often omitted. This is often considered to be a main limitation in narrative literature review methods, in that it leads to a lack of transparency and makes it difficult for other researchers to replicate the analytical process (Bryman, 2016; Jesson et al., 2011). Simultaneously, replicability is more

strongly connected with a positivist quality ideal than the social constructivist perspective in which I position myself as a researcher. The comprehensiveness of such reviews is also questioned due to their limited and potentially biased sample sizes (Bryman, 2016; Jesson et al., 2011). As a social constructivist I recognise that all researchers have biases. The interpretations throughout the thesis as a whole are based on my own personal understandings. As a social constructivist, I therefore consider bias to be unavoidable.

Some scholars argue that contrary or conflicting views may be excluded in narrative literature reviews, and that the reasons for including some material and excluding others are often not discussed (Jesson et al., 2011). However, Hammersley (2001) argues that the distinction between rational-rule-following systematic reviews and irrational-judgement narrative review is exaggerated, as even the most basic rule-following requires some level of interpretation. Bryman (2016) contends that poorly conducted reviews are often the source of criticism of traditional narrative reviews. Although it is not necessary to conduct a comprehensive systematic search in traditional narrative reviews, the method and selection rationale of my literature review is clearly described in Article I. As a result, this provides the reader with an in-depth understanding of the thoroughness of my argument, as well as the relevance and significance of the review and its conclusions in relation to their own information requirements (Jesson et al., 2011).

Document analysis

Document analysis serves as the methodological foundation for Articles II and III in this thesis. This is a broad term, which includes a variety of analytical approaches and types of data (Bryman, 2016). Article II is based on a qualitative content analysis of what Scott (1990) refers to as official documents from private sources. More specifically, Article II examines public documents published by the IOC in relation to the IOC's strategy to include esports in the Olympic Games. Here, a broad understanding of the term

“document” is used (Bryman, 2016), as the analysed sample includes both written and visual sources in the form of a video recording. In Article III, a discourse analysis of mass-media documents in the form of newspaper articles, videos, streams and podcasts is conducted to critically analyse the media’s construction of Chiquita Evans as the first woman player in the NBA 2K League. In the following, I explain the analytical approaches, samples and methodological and analytical limitations of each article in more detail.

Qualitative content analysis

According to Bryman (2016), qualitative content analysis is one of the most common approaches to conducting document analyses. This approach generally involves searching for underlying themes in the documents being analysed. Thus, content analysis is helpful for revealing patterns and trends in relation to sociological research (Bryman, 2016). In Article II, this approach is used to explore the potential inclusion of esports in the Olympic Games from a critical gender perspective. More specifically, the following research question is posed: “Which gender political dilemmas and equality challenges accompany the IOC’s strategy for the inclusion of esports (SVGs) in the Olympic Games?” Here, the aim is to address the main research question on how gendered power relations reflect gender (in)equality in sports-themed esports by highlighting how the IOC’s policy for the inclusion of esports in the Olympic Games may conflict with and create challenges in terms of policies relating to gender equality in sport as a whole.

Sample

Strategic sampling was used to generate the final selection of documents (Bratberg, 2021). This involved identifying relevant documents related to the IOC’s strategy to include esports in the Olympic Games by searching the IOC’s official website for related information. The final selection of texts consisted of three primary sources: 1) a video recording of an esports forum that gathered representatives from across the esports industry and the Olympic Movement who met to explore areas of similarity and

potential partnership (IOC, 2018), 2) an IOC press release following the IOC's 8th summit in 2019 which clarifies the IOC's stance on esports (IOC, 2019) and 3) public information concerning the overall values and gender policy goals of the IOC, with particular emphasis on a report produced by the Gender Equality Review Project (IOC, 2020a; IOC, 2020b).

This can be described as a consistent and homogeneous sample that is based on describing a specific event (Patton, 2002). Before conducting a qualitative document analysis, researchers need to consider several important aspects. In the case of this article, I considered what kind of text it was (document, media article, image or video), where it was published, who produced the text, if the producer was in an authoritative position or not and the reason why the text was produced (Bryman, 2016). All the main sources were by or for the IOC, as the Gender Equality Review Project is a working group established by the IOC. All the sources were also located on the IOC's official website and were published in English in the period 2018 to 2020. As such, these sources mainly represent a "top-down" perspective of the process of integrating esports into the Olympic programme that my co-authors and I analysed through a gender inclusion lens. However, the video recording of the esports forum contained some elements of a "bottom-up" perspective when invited esports players and stakeholders were allowed to respond to the IOC's plans.

Analytical approach

The final sample of selected documents in Article II represents a "top-down" perspective of the IOC's plans to include esports in the Olympics. Documents are never objective in nature, as they always represent a specific position (Bryman, 2016). In the case of this article, the "top-down" perspective in the selected texts is based on how the IOC views the inclusion of esports in the Olympics. These documents were analysed using a qualitative content analytical approach. According to Bryman (2016), this is one of the most common approaches to document analysis and involves searching for and analytically constructing underlying themes in the documents under analysis. The use

of this approach in Article II resulted in the articulation of two major themes: 1) gender mixed competition and gendered inequalities and 2) new gaming technologies and trends that may contribute to increased equality in esports. Although the IOC's plans to potentially include esports in future Olympic events clearly entail several gendered issues and challenges, these have rarely been discussed to date. Therefore, the aim of the analysis in Article II is to highlight some of these issues and challenges, such as the lack of playable female characters in SVGs, gendered inequalities in professional esports, the discrimination and harassment of women players and gendered preferences regarding playing platforms.

Methodological and analytical limitations

A common critique of qualitative content analysis relates to a lack of clearly specified procedures and theoretical bases (Bryman, 2016). Bratberg (2021) also emphasises that content analyses often face validity issues, especially those connected to the operationalisation of ideas and attitudes that emerge in the texts. For instance, the repetition of certain topics in some of the texts is not a sufficient criterion for being labelled as a theme. It is therefore important that the themes are guided by the research questions or research focus (Bryman, 2016), and that it is clear why they are important and significant (Bazeley, 2013). In the case of this article, I have attempted to demonstrate how the selected themes influence women esports players emotionally and economically, and how they may potentially increase or decrease gender equality in esports. These discussions are also linked to research-based knowledge about gender and esports in order to further deepen the analysis of IOC's esports policies. According to Bazeley (2013), such measures are likely to aid an understanding of how the themes were developed.

It is important to emphasise that the work in Article II is primarily situated in the sociology of sport. It focuses on the political context related to the IOC's policy for the inclusion of esports in the Olympic Movement and the Olympic Games, and how this may contradict and/or create challenges in terms of policies related to gender equality

in sport. Although the views and experiences of women players and stakeholders are expressed in the analysed data material, it is important to acknowledge that it is the IOC that decides who can be present and responsible for the organisation of the esports forum. From a feminist research point of view, the methodological approach used in this article is therefore not well suited to addressing the situated knowledge of women in the field. However, from a sports policy point of view, my co-authors and I believe that the methodological approach is fruitful for gaining insights into the narratives of gender inclusion that accompany the inclusion of esports in traditional sport organisations, which is the aim of this article.

In similar vein, it is also important to emphasise that the focus on “physical advantage” in this chapter is primarily viewed from the dominant discourses in international sports policy. This involves an interpretation of “physical advantage” based on how esports is performed by players from a pure physiological perspective compared to other forms of sport, which from a sports point of view results in the idea that men have no physical advantage over women in esports. However, such a view often fails to recognise how bodies – always gender and sexually specific – are created and rendered meaningful in online environments. As a result, Article II may have benefitted from a more nuanced understanding of bodily performances by drawing on the role of the online embodiment of gender (see Chapter 2; Bromseth & Sunden, 2011; Sundén, 2003).

Foucauldian discourse analysis

Discourse analysis is another common approach used to analyse documents, in which language serves as the focus of the study (Bryman, 2016). Article III in this thesis is based on the discourse analysis approach developed by Foucault (1972, 1978), which is commonly referred to as Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA). Foucault (1972, 1978) uses “discourse” as a term to describe how a certain system of linguistic categories pertaining to an item frames our understanding of that item. The discourse creates a certain kind of understanding that eventually constitutes that item (Bryman, 2016). As a result, language constructs reality, rather than simply reflecting on it. In Article III, I

address the main research question of how gender power relations reflect gender (in)equality in sports-themed esports by critically examining how the media confirms or challenges gendered representations and stereotypes in its coverage of Chiquita Evans, who became the first woman to participate in the NBA 2K League. More specifically, this examination is led by the following research question: “How was Chiquita Evans constructed in the media in relation to the established gendered stereotypes and power dynamics in esports during her participation in the 2019 NBA 2K League season?”

Sample

As in Article II, a strategic sample was used to form the final selection of media texts for a qualitative text analysis in Article III (Bratberg, 2021). Here, the term “text” is also broadly defined and includes written media articles, photos, videos, streams and podcasts (Bratberg, 2021). The final selection of media texts was based on including texts that related to Chiquita Evans’ participation in the NBA 2K League, which lasted from March 2019 to March 2021. The sample search was conducted in the online spaces in which Evans and her experiences were likely to be discussed and reported on, such as: (1) the NBA 2K League's official website, Twitch channel and YouTube channel, (2) her team's (Warriors Gaming Squad) official website, Twitch channel and YouTube channel and (3) online news media and news-related gaming and esports websites identified through Google.

Searching these channels yielded a final selection of 26 relevant media texts (see Table 1 below). As such, the final selection of media texts can be characterised as a homogenous and consistent sample connected to a specific event (Patton, 2002). The final sample was drawn from a variety of English-speaking media outlets: online news sites (ABC News, ESPN.com, Los Angeles Times, The Athletic, The Lily, Reuters), online content produced by the NBA 2K League (articles, broadcasts, podcasts and videos), news-related esports and gaming websites (Cheddar Esports, Dot Esports, GamesIndustry.biz, Kotaku, Polygon, SportTechie, The Score, Upcomer) and news-

related websites focusing on intersections of race, sports, gaming and culture (Black Girl Nerds, The Undeclared).

Table 1. Final selection of media texts, Article III⁵

Author/publication	Media (type)	Title
Boren (2019, March 7)	The Lily (online article)	NBA 2K League drafts its first woman
Cheddar Esports (2019, March 8)	Cheddar Esports (video podcast)	Chiquita Evans makes history as the first woman drafted in the NBA 2K League
Cohen (2019, March 7)	Sport Techie (online article)	Basketball I.Q. helped Chiquita Evans become the first woman in the NBA 2K League
Cole (2021, February 9)	NBA 2K League (audio podcast)	What's next for women in the NBA 2K League?
Davidson (2019, July 30)	The Athletic (online article)	"The positivity and support outweigh the negative": For the NBA 2K League's first female player, it's been quite a ride.
Faris (2019, July 16)	The Score (online article)	"She's the perfect first": Chiquita Evans is changing the game for women in NBA 2K
Jackson (2019, March 3)	Kotaku (online article)	Chiquita Evans could be the first woman in NBA 2K's Pro League
Li (2019, March 5)	Dot Esports (online article)	Chiquita Evans is the first woman drafted in the NBA 2K League
Mitchell (2019, March 7)	Los Angeles Times (online article)	Chiquita Evans breaks a video game barrier
NBA 2K League (2019a, March 6)	NBA 2K League (online article)	Chiquita Evans (Chiquitae126) on becoming the first woman selected in NBA 2K League draft
NBA 2K League (2019b, April 17)	NBA 2K League (stream)	<i>Regular season week 2</i>
NBA 2K League (2019c, March 2)	NBA 2K League (video)	<i>2019 NBA 2K League draft hopefuls: chiquitae126</i>
NBA 2K League (2019d, March 5)	NBA 2K League (video)	<i>NBA 2K League Draft 2019</i>
NBA 2K League (2019e, May 17)	NBA 2K League (stream)	<i>NBA 2K League week 5 – day 3</i>
NBA 2K League (2019f, June 19)	NBA 2K League (stream)	<i>Regular season – week 9</i>
Obringer (2019, April 18)	Daily Esports (online article)	Chiquita becomes first female to compete in NBA 2K League
Pingue (2019, April 1)	Reuters (online article)	NBA 2K League's first female player eager to silence doubters
Sarkar (2019, May 24)	Polygon (online article)	The first woman in the NBA 2K League is focused on putting in the work
Seiner (2019, March 6)	ABC News (online article)	Warriors draft first woman player into NBA 2K esports league
Starkey (2019a, March 6)	The Undeclared (online article)	Chiquita Evans is a trailblazer as the first black woman drafted in the NBA 2K League
Starkey (2019b, July 29)	The Undeclared (online article)	Chiquita Evans is a critical role player in Warriors' NBA 2K success
The Breakfast Club (2019, May 6)	The Breakfast Club (video podcast)	<i>Chiquita Evans on being first woman drafter to NBA 2K League, sexism in gaming + more</i>
Tsukayama (2019, May 24)	The Lily (online article)	Chiquita Evans is the only woman in the NBA's video game league

⁵ For the full references, see the texts marked with * in Article III's reference list.

Turner (2019, March 26)	Black Girl Nerds (online article)	Chiquita Evans, the first woman drafted into the NBA2K League
Valentine (2019, March 6)	Gamesindustry.biz (online article)	Warriors Gaming Squad drafts NBA 2K League's first woman player
Warriors Gaming (2019, May 8)	Warriors Gaming (video)	<i>First woman in the NBA 2K League, Chiquita</i>

Analytical approach

The final selection of media texts was analysed using an analytical approach based on Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA). While there are many ways of performing FDA, I followed Willig's (2013) six steps. The first part of my analysis focused on the first step in Willig's (2013) approach, which involved identifying and categorising all references to Evans and identifying common understandings and interpretations. Following this step, the analysis revealed three major discursive construction of Evans: 1) as an exceptional athletic woman in a (white) masculine domain, 2) as a capable but feminine player and 3) as a player between sports and media logics.

The second part of the analysis focused on the remaining steps of Willig's (2013) approach, which involved: 1) locating Evans' discursive constructions within larger discourses, 2) considering the discursive context in which the Evans' constructions were deployed, 3) determining which subject positions the Evans' constructions articulated, 4) examining which possibilities for action are made available by these constructions and 5) considering different types of subjective experiences that the discursive constructions might provide. These steps revealed three major discourses on which the media representations of Evans were based, each presenting her with various possible subject positions and spaces for opportunity. These major discourses were: 1) a biological gender difference discourse, 2) a coping discourse and 3) a sports performance discourse.

Feminist poststructuralist theory was used (in this case derived from Butler, 2006, 2011; Foucault, 1972, 1977, 1978; Weedon, 1997) as a reference point to call into question the assumed male privilege and norm in sports-themed esports. From this theoretical standpoint, gender stereotypes and power relations are viewed as being

resistant to change as a result of their institutional and social reproduction through language and discourse (Weedon, 1997).

Methodological and analytical limitations

Discourse analysis has become a popular and widely used approach for empirical studies since the 1980s, particularly among constructionist scholars (Aydin-Düzgit & Rumelili, 2018). It is important to note that discourse analysis approaches are not uniform and can be used by a diverse group of researchers in variety of ways – some more freely and illustratively, others more systematically and from a variety of theoretical perspectives (Aydin-Düzgit & Rumelili, 2018). Among the criticisms of this approach, Bratberg (2021) notes that discourse analysis is rarely appropriate for generalisations of a defined population (external validity), which is a common objective in social research. Moreover, it cannot be fully assessed by strictly specified criteria for validity and reliability (Bratberg, 2021). As a result, referring to conceptual and internal validity as research criteria is difficult. However, Bratberg (2021) recommends researchers to draw on a broader definition of validity when working with discourse analysis. After all, an important part of discourse analysis is to illustrate how some concepts cannot be clearly captured by demonstrating the sliding and friction that exist between various meanings. However, it is then important to provide a clear explanation for the basis of a specific interpretation, as well as the consequences that follow (Bratberg, 2021). In Article III, I have tried to achieve this by providing a thorough description of the theoretical basis on which my interpretations are based, as well as providing detailed descriptions of how I have read and analysed the selected media texts. Finally, all the selected media texts are presented in a way that makes them easy to locate.

In terms of analytical limitations, Article III does not enter into a deeper discussion about some of the institutional measures introduced by the NBA 2K League to improve the number of women players in the league. For instance, such measures included showcase tournaments and women-specific development camps that provided

women players with spaces in which they could display and improve their playing skills (NBA 2K League, 2018; Peterson, 2018; Sarkar, 2018). As this study only examines media texts related to Evans' participation in the league, it does not consider how such measures may have benefitted Evans or other women players leading up to her successful draft. Ideally, such institutional components could have been emphasised in this study to ensure a deeper discussion about women players in the NBA 2K League.

Survey

Article IV addresses the main research question by examining how esports players perceive gendered character representations in SVGs. This is done via an online survey of SVG players. The research question here is: "How do players perceive gendered character representations in the SVG genre?"

Online survey and sample

The data material in Article IV is based on an online survey of SVG players (see Appendix B for the full survey). The survey consisted of various statements relating to how players perceived female characters in SVGs. The statements are presented in the next section. Nettskjema, an online survey and data management software provided by the University of Oslo, was used to distribute the surveys. Before responding to the survey, participants were informed about the purpose and methodological approach of the study and asked to give their written consent to taking part in it before being able to respond to the survey (see Appendix A). The study was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) (see Appendix C) and therefore follows the ethical guidelines for data processing provided by the NSD.

Participants were recruited using convenience sampling of members of various online SVGs platforms, such as Reddit and Discord. Respondents were mostly recruited through postings on subreddits (sub-sections of the internet discussion forum reddit.com), which were chosen owing to the high representation of most SVGs and high levels of engagement among members. In addition, the survey was distributed to

several smaller, female-specific gaming forums and Discord channels due to an initial limited number of female respondents on the online SVGs platforms. The final sample included a total number of 444 participants. The sample consisted of 350 men (79%) and 94 women (21%) who were primarily between the ages of 16 and 35 (75%) and located in either North and Central America (55%) or Europe (32%) (See Table 1b in Article IV).

Statistical variables and analysis

This study is based on a logistic regression analysis with players' perceptions of gendered character representations in SVGs as dependent variables. To determine a statistically significant correlation, a $p < 0.05$ requirement was set. All the statistical analyses were conducted in Stata 15.

In order to examine players' perceptions of gendered character representations in SVGs, the participants were asked to rate four statements (dependent variables): (1) *"I believe most sports video games portray women poorly"*, (2) *"Being able to play characters of the same gender as myself is important to me"*, (3) *"I feel that there are too few female characters in sports video games"* and (4) *"I believe more girls and women would engage in sports video games if there were more female characters in the games"*. A seven-point Likert scale (1 = "Strongly disagree", 2 = "Disagree", 3 = "Somewhat disagree", 4 = "Neither disagree nor agree", 5 = "Somewhat agree", 6 = "Agree", 7 = "Strongly agree") was used to rate the responses. While ordinal variables such as these are normally the basis of linear regression, the purpose of the study was to analyse the differences in responses at both ends of the Likert scale, rather than different degrees of agreement and disagreement. As a result, the responses were dichotomised using a cut-off value of 1-4 = 0 (disagree) and 5-7 = 1 (agree). Explanatory variables consisted of demographic information related to gender, age, education, ethnicity and location. Additionally, gaming frequency was included as an explanatory variable to determine any potential differences between participants who played SVGs

at least once a week (core players) and those who played less than once a week (casual players).

Methodological and analytical limitations

It is essential to consider whether the measurements are reliable or not, and whether they are valid representations of the concepts they are meant to explore (Bryman, 2016). According to Ringdal (2013), overall source criticism is one way of measuring reliability. This can be achieved by a careful reading and assessment of the survey questions and an accurate assessment of the data registration. For the reader to be able to assess the reliability of this study, I have attempted to describe the quantitative data registration process as clearly as possible in the methods chapter and its related appendix.⁶

The question of validity pertains to whether an indicator (or set of indicators) used to measure a concept truly measures that concept (Bryman, 2016). The use of non-validated items in this study to explore players' perceptions of gendered character representations may have influenced the interpretation of the items (face validity) (Bryman, 2016). However, these items were developed based on similar studies as a way of reducing this influence (see Duggan, 2015; Hall, 2015). Another issue concerning the validity of a study relates to the generalisability of the research findings (external validity) (Bryman, 2016). Researchers conducting quantitative research are typically interested in being able to assert that their findings can be generalised beyond the limits of the specific context in which the research is conducted. This is commonly achieved by probability sampling (Bryman, 2016). However, this sampling approach is both costly and time consuming. As a result, alternative approaches, e.g., convenience sampling, are now widely used in social research (Bryman, 2016). The use of convenience sampling in this study means that research results are only known to be generalisable to the sample analysed (Bornstein et al., 2013). It is therefore important

⁶ See Appendices A, B and C.

to not make generalisations beyond the population from which the sample was drawn (Bryman, 2016). This type of sampling also often leads to a limited number of underrepresented sociodemographic sub-groups, such as ethnic minorities and an insufficient ability to recognise the differences in sociodemographic factors (Bornstein et al., 2013). When considering the relevance of a study for a broader variety of contexts, researchers are therefore frequently directed by discretionary considerations (Skog, 2007).

Finally, some may argue that the use of logistic regression as the analytical approach in this study could contribute to smaller group differences seeming bigger by making the categories less ‘fine-masked’. However, this may not be an issue in that the study aimed to compare the differences in responses at both ends of the Likert-scale, rather than various levels of agreement and disagreement. Thus, the variance in levels of agreement was not part of our research question (Acock, 2018).

There are some analytical limitations and weaknesses connected to Article IV that I would like to address. First, after the publication of this article I became aware of a leap in the discussion from findings suggesting that “positive and non-sexualised representations of female characters could attract more girls and women to esports” to the study’s findings suggesting that “respondents believe more girls and women would engage in SVGs if more female characters were included in them” (see pages 215-216*). Although there may be some connection between positive/non-sexualised female characters and the number of female characters in a game (see Lynch et al., 2016), these two topics could have been more clearly separated and the relationship between them more carefully unpacked in the discussion. Additionally, Article IV uses esports participation as a catch-all term to describe all the participants’ engagement in a sports video game play, even though the sample includes both professional and non-professional players. While esports is not a fixed term, it is commonly used to describe competitive video game play at a professional level. Therefore, the exact use of this

term in this article should have been more explicit in order to make the premises for the discussion clearer.

Ethical considerations

According to professional standards, the researcher is accountable for informed consent, trust, protection and securing individuals' privacy by confidentiality (Ryen, 2004). These considerations were primarily relevant in Article IV, which was the only study involving people as sources. In the case of Article IV, the study was approved by the NSD, and the data collection and analysis were conducted in accordance with national research ethical standards. Descriptions of the guidelines provided by the NSD for this study can be found in Appendix C. After agreeing to take part in the online survey related to Article IV, the participants were first directed to an information page describing the purpose and methodological approach of the study. They were also told what their involvement in the study would mean for them, what the survey data would be used for, who would have access to it and that their participation was completely voluntary. Complete anonymity for the participants was also guaranteed.

Before being able to respond to the survey, the participants were required to give their written consent (see Appendix A). However, obtaining consent through digital research methods is often more challenging than is the case in traditional research methods (Tjønnndal & Fylling, 2021). For instance, someone could claim to be somebody else, thereby making it harder for the researcher to ensure that the consent is genuine. Secondly, it is not known whether the participant has adequate consent competence (Tjønnndal & Fylling, 2021). Here, it is important to consider the vulnerability of those involved (Tjønnndal & Fylling, 2021). Given the nature of the questions asked in the survey, I consider it unlikely that the survey data would have any physically, socially or mentally harmful consequences for any of the participants.

The remaining articles were all based on textual sources (research articles, sports policy documents and media texts), which should not be ethically questionable.

However, as all these sources are available online, it is important to consider whether the publisher intends the online content to be public even though it may appear openly available. This refers to what the Norwegian National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH) refers to as the concept of reasonable expectations of publicity (NESH, 2019). As the sources that are used in this thesis have been published by well-established international research journals (Article I), international sports organisations (Article II) and news media outlets (Article III), I consider them as being intended for public use.

Chapter summary

In this chapter I explain the methodological approaches and considerations of the thesis. First, I describe my position within the philosophy of science, namely social constructivism. Second, I outline my researcher positionality in the study. Thereby, I provide an explanation of the overall research design of the thesis that is used to examine the main research question about how gendered power relations reflect gender (in)equality in sports-themed esports. In Article I, I address this question by providing an account of how gendered power relations and identity construction are understood in the existing research on gender and esports by means of a narrative literature review. In Article II, I explore the main research question from a sports policy point of view through a qualitative document analysis of the IOC's policy for the inclusion of esports in the Olympic Games and how this policy may create challenges in terms of policies relating to gender equality in sport as a whole. In Article III I focus on the main research question through the lens of media representation, specifically focusing on how the media confirms or challenges gendered representations and stereotypes by conducting a discourse analysis of the media coverage related to Chiquita Evans' participation as the first woman player in the NBA 2K League. Similarly, Article IV also focuses on female media representation but this time in the context of gendered character representation in SVGs. This is done through an online survey of

players to explore their perceptions of game characters in SVGs. In the final section of this chapter I discuss some of the ethical considerations of the research project.

CHAPTER 5 – PRESENTATION OF ARTICLES

Chapter 5 provides a brief summary of the main findings in the four articles of the thesis. This chapter is included in the thesis because all four articles have not been published in Open Access journals – which means that some will not appear in the online edition of the thesis. This chapter outlines the research questions and main findings in each article, which are then discussed in relation to the overall aim and main research question of the thesis in the following chapter (Chapter 6). The data material and methodological approaches in the articles are also briefly presented.

Article I: Gender in esports research: a literature review

[By Egil Trasti Rogstad, published online June 2, 2021, in *European Journal for Sport and Society*, 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16138171.2021.1930941>]

The first article in the thesis explores and examines how gender inequalities in esports have been reflected in previous research. Unlike traditional sports, where men are often considered to have a physical advantage over women, physical skills and performances are far less significant in esports settings, which allows both men and women to participate in the same leagues and tournaments. As a result, esports has often been highlighted as a form of sport that should allow for an equality that is rarely possible in other sports. However, research has demonstrated that esports continues to support male dominance and celebrate the dominant form of masculinity. Based on a traditional narrative review of existing research on gender and esports, Article I explores how esports has become moulded by hegemonic conceptions, despite the non-physical nature of esports competitions. More specifically, this review is guided by the following research question: How is the theoretical concept of hegemonic masculinity used in the literature to understand gendered power inequalities in esports?

The data material in this article is based on a sample of 21 peer-reviewed English and Scandinavian research papers, anthologies and doctoral dissertations published between 2006 and 2020. After determining the final sample, a thematic analysis was carried out to identify the recurring themes in the selected studies. This process revealed three major themes: 1) masculinities in esports, 2) online harassment and 3) negotiating gendered expectations.

Although there are clear differences between traditional sports and esports, the results of this literature review suggest that several esports environments are formed by the same conceptions of hegemonic masculinity that dominate other forms of sport. This is believed to be a consequence of the fact that esports has been organised by and for men, thereby resulting in a highly masculine environment. Although the alleged physiological superiority of men over women on which male domination and privilege are based is not as central to the virtual nature of esports as in other sports, skills that are only 'masculine' because they are virtual – that is, grounded in long-established traditions of male dominance in the video game culture – have taken root in the esports environment. Thus, traditional sports and esports discursively link masculinity, athleticism and competition together in very similar ways. Both areas provide justifications for a profoundly imbalanced 'playing field' (Wachs, 2002), where assumptions of areas in which women fall short – skill, ambition, desire and capability – are presented as physical or mental discrepancies between genders and reinforced by discursive, material and behavioural validations of inferior and secondary roles for women.

Article II: Who are included? A gender perspective on the IOC's strategy to include esports in the Olympic Games

[By Egil Trasti Rogstad, Bjørnar Blaaid, and Anne Tjønnndal (2021), published in A. Tjønnndal (ed.), *Idrett, kjønn og ledelse* (pp. 211-28). Fagbokforlaget.]

The second article of the thesis has been published in an edited collection relating to sport, gender and leadership. Article II was originally published in Norwegian but has been translated into English for inclusion in this thesis. The collection is edited by Associate Professor Anne Tjønnndal (Nord University, Norway).

Article II examines the IOC's strategy to include esports in the Olympics from a gender perspective. The IOC has long worked on a strategy to include esports in future Olympic events without contradicting Olympic values. However, various stakeholders have voiced their opposition to this proposal, stating a variety of reasons as to why esports should not be included in the Olympic Games. Among these reasons, many have pointed to the general lack of gender equality in esports as a major concern. While many have emphasised esports as a potentially unique Olympic contest, in that men and women athletes can compete on the same terms in the same event and for the same medals, there are a number of challenges that the esports industry must overcome. Given that esports could achieve Olympic recognition through inclusion in the Olympic Games, this article aims to link the gender difficulties of esports with the objectives, values and gender policies of the Olympic Movement. It is against this background that the following research question is formulated: What gender political dilemmas and equality challenges accompany the IOC's strategy for the inclusion of esports (SVGs) in the Olympic Games?

This research question is examined using an explorative analytical approach based on a document analysis of the published and public information concerning the IOC's plans for esports. First, the IOC's strategy itself is analysed based on two main sources: a video recording of an esports conference arranged by the IOC in 2018 and attended

by representatives from the esports industry, sports federations, athletes and the media, and a press release following the IOC's 8th summit in 2019 clarifying the IOC's stance on esports. Relevant documents regarding the IOC's overarching political values and goals for equality were also analysed. In the analysis, the potential dilemmas and opportunities that may arise in relation to equality and gender balance if esports should be included in the Olympic Games are discussed.

In the article, we discuss how an inclusion of esports aligns with IOC's fundamental sports political values, the concept of mixed-gender competition and different conditions for men and women esports players, and the potential of new game technology and ways of organising esports competitions. We emphasise that gender equality is a key criterion for the entrance of a new sport in the Olympic Games. Over the last few years, the IOC has placed greater emphasis on protecting athletes against sexism. Given that esports has been characterised by marginalisation and discrimination, and that women only make up about 2 percent of all SVG players, securing the appropriate involvement and protection of women players may present a major challenge if esports is to be included in the Olympics. Furthermore, we contrast the practice of mixed-gender competitions in esports with the conventional division of Olympic events into separate events for men and women. This part of the discussion revolves around two issues: 1) which competition model best protects women esports players' opportunities and experiences while competing and 2) how mixed-gender or gender-divided competition can effectively promote equality in esports. Finally, we consider how new game technology and new ways of organising esports competitions could help to break down the current gender differences in esports by, for instance, the increased popularity of mobile-based esports and an increased use and development of VR and AR technology that could potentially open for a greater diversity of players, independent of the preferred gaming platforms. In the conclusion we list the various challenges that the esports industry will need to address if esports is to become an inclusive and recognised part of Olympic sports, such as the lack of

female characters in the games, the gender inequality in economic conditions in professional esports, the discrimination and harassment of women esports players and gendered preferences in the choice of gaming platforms.

Article III: Media (Re)presentation of a Black Woman Esports Player: The Case of Chiquita Evans in the NBA 2K League

[By Egil Trasti Rogstad, re-submitted after review in the International Journal of Sport Communication]

The third article takes the popularity of SVGs and the increasing integration of this genre of esports into traditional sports organisations as starting points. However, the limited participation of women players in sports-themed esports has been a major concern in the merging of esports and traditional sports. In 2019, Chiquita Evans became the first woman to be drafted to the NBA 2K League, the esports equivalent of the North American basketball league (NBA). Based on a Foucauldian discourse analysis of the media coverage related to Evans' participation in the league, the aim of this article is to critically examine how the media constructed Evans according to the dominant gender stereotypes and power dynamics in esports. More specifically, the article examines the following research question: How was Chiquita Evans constructed in the media in relation to the established gendered stereotypes and power dynamics in esports during her participation in the 2019 NBA 2K League season?

Feminist poststructuralist theory is used as a theoretical framework to examine the media texts, which are analysed using Foucauldian discourse analysis. The data material is based on media texts (written texts, images, videos, streams and podcasts) relating to Evans' participation. The sample consisted of 26 media texts published across a variety of English-speaking media outlets, including newspaper articles, videos, streams and podcasts. The media texts were analysed following Willig's (2013) stepwise approach to Foucauldian discourse analysis. The analysis of the media texts was twofold. First, the discursive constructions of Evans in the media coverage were

analysed, before moving on to an analysis of the different discourses, subject positions and identity negotiations contained in them. Overall, the analysis revealed that the media's construction of Evans remained embedded in traditional gendered stereotypes and power dynamics that necessitated the negotiation of femininity. Even though several media texts assert that gender has no influence on esports performance, esports' strong association with an implicit male discourse suggests that competitive participation is intrinsically gendered. Although the media's portrayal of Evans worked to increase the respect and acceptance of women players, it also perpetuated gendered stereotypes and power dynamics concerning physiology and sports that disparage (ordinary) women. As a result, this article argues that an increased female representation does not mean that existing power relations will be challenged, or that alternative and oppositional discourses that challenge the established male dominance in sporting contexts will emerge.

Article IV: The Importance of Female Characters in Esports: A Quantitative Analysis of Players' Perceptions of Gendered Character Representations in Sports Video Games

[By Egil Trasti Rogstad and Mads Skauge (2022), published in A. Tjønnndal (ed.) *Social issues in esports* (pp. 65-80). Routledge.]

The fourth and final article of the thesis has been accepted for publication in an edited collection on social issues in esports. This collection is edited by Associate Professor Anne Tjønnndal (Nord University, Norway).

Article IV examines players' perceptions of gendered character representations in SVGs. The portrayal and proliferation of female game characters play an important role in the overall negative stereotyping of women in gaming environments. Notions of gaming as an activity for boys and men have been found to influence game creators' conceptions of their major audience, resulting in game content and product promotions that pander to a stereotyped young male audience, as seen by sexualised

and marginalised portrayals of female characters in the games. Until recently, the world's most popular SVG series, e.g., FIFA and NBA 2K, did not allow players to play as female characters. Although female characters have now become more available in such games, they still remain underrepresented and are often restricted to a few game modes. Some previous studies have indicated that the low number of playable female game characters in video games could negatively influence the participation of girls and women as players. Given that SVGs remain one of the least gender diverse esports genres in terms of players, the aim of this article is to explore players' perceptions of gendered character representations in SVGs and the importance of these representations for players. The following research question is posed: How do players perceive gendered character representations in the SVG genre?

This research question is addressed by means of an online survey of 444 SVG players (79% men and 21% women). Respondents were asked to rate four statements on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = "Strongly disagree," 7 = "Strongly agree"). The statements were: 1) "I believe most sports video games portray women poorly", 2) "Being able to play characters of the same gender as myself is important to me", 3) "I feel that there are too few female characters in sports video games" and 4) "I believe more girls and women would engage in sports video games if there were more female characters in the games". Age, gender, education and ethnicity were included as control variables and the responses were analysed based on logistic regression analysis.

Judith Butler's (2006, 2009) concepts of performativity and precarity are used as a theoretical framework to analyse the role of gendered media representation in the perpetuation of established gender norms. Performativity refers to Butler's (2006) understanding of identity as a continuous performance that is rendered natural by the individuals concerned. Precarity is closely related to performativity and refers to the process in which such performances are made comprehensible to others through larger networks of meaning (Butler, 2009).

The findings in this article revealed that women respondents exhibited greater preferences for gendered character representations in SVGs - and female character representations in particular - than men. Gender effects were found in all four dependent variables at the <0.01 level. Despite the fact that the number of female characters in SVGs has expanded in recent years, many people still believe that female character options are too limited. This was confirmed in the study's findings, which found that most respondents, particularly women, believed there were too few female characters in SVGs.

In the discussion section we suggest that the significance of game character options could be explained by how individuals identify with distinct identities in different social circumstances. According to Butler's (2009) concept of precarity, certain identities are rendered plausible, credible and viable through media representations. As a result, gaming character representations either allow or restrict the adoption of specific identities based on the available character options. In addition to the overall increase in female character possibilities, research has found a decline in the sexualisation of video game characters. However, the findings of this study indicate that female respondents in particular feel that most SVGs portray women poorly. Previous research has revealed that stereotyped depictions of female characters in video games may create discomfort and dissuade female gamers from participating (Hartmann & Klimmt, 2006). As a result, positive and non-sexualised representations of female characters may play an important role in attracting more girls and women to take part in esports, thereby contributing to improved gender equality in these spaces. This is reinforced by the findings of this study, which show that the majority of respondents, particularly women, thought that if SVGs included more female characters then more girls and women would be encouraged to play. The article concludes with a discussion about the importance of media representation and the role it could play in reducing gender differences in competitive gaming spaces. Moreover, the limitations of the study and potential directions for future studies are discussed.

CHAPTER 6 – FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

In this chapter I discuss the articles' findings and their implications in more depth and examine what they can tell us in relation to the main research question of how gendered power relations reflect gender (in)equality in sports-themed esports. In the following I first of all present my findings and the overall contributions of the thesis. I then go on to discuss the implications of the findings concerning the continuing integration of esports into traditional sports in terms of gender equality and inclusivity.

Findings

Overall, the findings in this thesis demonstrate how different gendered power relations and stereotypes in and around sports-themed esports environments reflect gender inequality. Although esports is perceived as a non-physical form of sport in which men have no competitive advantage over women, the findings in the thesis indicate that participation in sports-themed esports necessitates a particular form of “virtual athleticism” (Taylor et al., 2009) that is closely aligned with male physical attributes. Thus, the gender inequalities that are commonly associated with traditional sports are reproduced at multiple levels in and around sports-themed esports environments. This happens in spite of the imagined potential of the esports' digital sporting space to break traditional gender stereotypes and barriers, thus demonstrating how the gendered and physical bodies of players are always central to their performances even when competing in virtual environments (Bromseth & Sundén, 2011; Sundén, 2003). This highlights how deeply rooted male superiority is in sporting contexts and how the online embodiment of women players is never separated from dominant gender discourses (Bromseth & Sundén, 2011).

The continuation of gendered stereotypes and barriers in esports settings is clear in the review of existing research on esports and gender in Article I. Although men are believed to have no physical advantage over women in esports performances, Articles I and III demonstrate how traditional sports and esports discursively link masculinity,

athleticism and competition in ways that position women as inferior and subordinate to men. As a result, the findings suggest that the identities and experiences of women players reflect a continuous and complex negotiation of gendered expectations, as well as a constant contestation of their dedication, skills and knowledge of esports. In addition, women players have to overcome structural factors that influence their participation in sports-themed esports, such as sexualised harassment and marginalised access to communities providing social networks and practice and competition opportunities.

The convergence of esports and traditional sports may also entail several gender political dilemmas and equality challenges in terms of sport policy, as my co-authors and I discuss in Article II. In this article, we shed light on the following dilemmas: (1) the lack of female character options in SVGs, (2) gender inequality in economic conditions in professional esports, (3) discrimination and sexual harassment of women esports players and (4) gendered preferences in the choice of gaming platforms. While gender equality is one of the IOC's key sports political ideals and an important condition for the inclusion of new sports in the Olympic Games, esports environments have been found to marginalise and discriminate against women players (Darvin et al., 2020; Ruvalcaba et al. 2018; Taylor, 2012). We argue that this may create significant challenges for the IOC if esports is to become an accepted and inclusive part of future Olympic events. In particular, we discuss the various limitations and possibilities related to gender-mixed and gender-separated esports events. For some women players, separate women's tournaments represent restriction, whereas for others they offer safe areas for improving skills and abilities without fear of harassment. Given the significant problems to equality that the harassment and marginalisation of women players pose, we suggest that separating esports contests in the Olympics by gender could be a viable option in order to ensure a steady inclusion and promotion of women players.

The media plays an important role in the overall perpetuation of gender stereotypes, and equal and fair representations of women in the media is crucial if sport is to become more inclusive of women (Lippe & Hovden, 2019; Ross & Padovani, 2017). Sports-themed esports has long been a site in which the representation of women, both as players and characters in the games, has been much lower than in other esports genres. Therefore, Articles III and IV focus on critical examinations of female representations in sports-themed esports environments. First focusing on the media representations of women as players, the findings in Article III regarding the media's coverage of Chiquita Evans as the first woman player in the NBA 2K League suggest that the media representation of Evans remained embedded within traditional gendered stereotypes and power structures that required the negotiation of femininity. On the one hand, I find that Evans' background as a semi-professional basketball player contributed to the formation of a positive and empowering representation of her by drawing on discourses of athleticism and basketball knowledge. On the other hand, by drawing on such discourses, I argue that the media simultaneously contributed to reproducing notions and stereotypes concerning biology and athleticism that position women players as inferior. As a result, I argue that increased representations of women will not ensure that established power relations are contested or that new, opposing and specifically female discourses will emerge.

Secondly, focusing on the representations of women as characters in the games, in Article IV my co-author and I find that there is a clear gendered pattern in the players' perceptions of female game characters. Specifically, we find that women have clearer and stronger perceptions of female characters than men. More specifically, the women players in this study say that being able to play with female characters is important to them, and that more girls and women would play SVGs if the games included more female characters. However, many players also feel that female character options are too limited and that female characters are poorly portrayed in the games. As a result, our findings reinforce the view that female character options are important to women

players, as game characters become sites that enable or prevent players from taking on certain identities (Shaw, 2015; Taylor, 2006).

Knowledge contributions and future research

Overall, the thesis adds to a scientific knowledge production on esports by providing new and nuanced accounts of how gendered power relations reflect gender inequalities in sports-themed esports. Given the continuing convergence of esports and traditional sports, understanding the diversity of esports and how this relates to gender equality is crucial if it is to become an accepted and inclusive part of sport for everyone (Kruthika, 2020). The esports industry's issues concerning prevalent sexist, misogynistic and hostile attitudes and treatment of women players have been highlighted as challenging the values and ideals of the institution of sport (Pack & Hedlund, 2020). While SVGs have been considered more conducive to the values of sport than other esports genres, such as first-person shooter games that feature particularly violent content (IOC, 2019; Pack & Hedlund, 2020), few scholars have looked at how sports-themed esports align with the values of sport in other areas, such as gender inclusivity (Darvin et al., 2020). Thus, this thesis contributes important new insights into how gender inequalities in sports-themed esports are reflected in previous research (Article I), sports policy (Article II), female representation in the media (Article III) and how players perceive female representation in the games themselves (Article IV).

In their paper on the inclusion of esports in the Olympic Games, Pack and Hedlund (2020) suggest that "due to the reality that fewer women play esports at the highest levels and instead play more casually, certain corrective action would need to take place to ensure equality and inclusive participation for both men and women" (p. 492). However, rather than attributing the low number of women esports players to differences in gendered play preferences, I argue that such actions must consider the complexity of the barriers that women face in sports-themed esports environments.

Despite their interest in and devotion to esports, the review of research on gender and esports in Article I reveals that players can be mistreated and harassed in ways that make them feel excluded and marginalised. This demonstrates that for some, the decision to not participate in esports is not only a matter of individual choice or gendered play preferences, but also of how elite sport-based ideals and values, tolerance of mistreatment and sexual harassment in esports environments discourage girls and women from competitive play.

Although many agree that certain corrective actions need to take place within organisational sports in order to ensure the equal and balanced participation of men and women players (Kruthika, 2020; Pack & Hedlund, 2020), there is still limited research and discussion about what such actions should be. In this regard, Article II maps and emphasises some of the early discussions between sport and esports stakeholders about the gendered challenges in the IOC's strategy to include esports in the Olympic Games. This is a complex discussion, in that both the limitations and the possibilities for new forms of sport are important in the convergence of esports and traditional sports (Taylor, 2012). However, as Article II indicates, there are several important gender-related challenges involved in the potential inclusion of esports in the Olympic Games. Therefore, it is important that these challenges are taken seriously and not overlooked by the appealing advantages of such an inclusion in terms of outreach and engagement (Pack & Hedlund, 2020). As a result, future research should focus on how gender equality and inclusiveness are maintained in practice as integrated esports competitions become part of traditional sport events.

Social exclusion is also a matter of social beliefs that define legitimate bodies in sport (Frisby & Ponc, 2013). In terms of gender construction, the sportification of esports competitions as entertainment products is an important topic to consider (Witkowski, 2013). In previous research on gender and esports, physical strength has not been considered an essential part of traditional masculinity (Taylor et al., 2009; Witkowski, 2013). Taylor (2012) notes that "within pro gaming you will find short and tall, skinny

and chubby, fit and not” (p.116). Thus, there is no dominant masculine physique in the esports scene. On the other hand, an athletic body may provide some value as a form of cultural capital (Witkowski, 2018). However, the findings in the examination of the media coverage of Chiquita Evans indicate that physical prowess and an embodied knowledge of sport are essential components of how she is constructed and contribute to an even closer connection between the online embodiment and corporeality of the player (Bromseth & Sundén, 2011). Therefore, it is conceivable that the importance of physical strength increases considerably in sports-themed esports environments compared to other types of esports environments. This may be a result of the fact that the NBA 2K and several other major sports-themed esports leagues are run by professional sports leagues. Subsequently, the sports-themed esports leagues themselves naturally build on and embrace dominant athletic masculinities (Witkowski, 2018). In the case of Chiquita Evans, I argue that the media representation of her may contribute to reproducing biologically deterministic beliefs that position women as inferior to men in esports.

While research on women and esports has increased in recent decades, Jenson and de Castell (2010) encourage new work that draws more on poststructuralist, feminist theories in explorations of gender and gameplay. By examining female media representations in sports-themed esports through the lens of poststructuralist feminist theories, in this instance drawn from Butler (2006, 2009), Foucault (1972, 1978) and Weedon (1997), this thesis helps to fill this theoretical knowledge gap. In the case of Chiquita Evans becoming the first woman to compete in the NBA 2K League, the thesis demonstrates how women players themselves tend to reproduce and reflect gendered beliefs in esports. Furthermore, I draw on Butler’s (2006, 2009) understandings of gender in Article IV to explain gender differences related to how players perceive gendered character representations in SVGs. According to Shaw (2015), drawing on this understanding of gender helps to build a claim for the political significance of representation beyond a simple reconstruction of who counts as a marketable

audience. As a result, the thesis contributes a more nuanced understanding of how players perceive the significance of game character options.

Current research has often treated esports monolithically and rarely addressed how gendered issues can emerge differently in the various esports genres. Thus, this thesis makes an important contribution by highlighting how gendered issues evolve in sports-themed esports. However, more research on gender and sports-themed esports is still needed to reveal how emerging issues and developments reflect gender (in)equality in this genre. While my literature review of gender and esports shows how exclusionary mechanisms in esports have resulted in a significant underrepresentation of women, online harassment and gendered stereotypes, there is still too little research on how and whether organisational measures to improve female participation in esports contribute to gender inclusion in esports (Piggott et al., 2022). Current research has gained some understanding about how gender inclusion in esports could be improved, but many questions also remain unanswered. As a result, further scientific investigations of initiatives and efforts to enhance gender inclusiveness in esports are needed. For instance, the NBA 2K League has developed an initiative called “Women in Gaming Initiative” that aims to bring together top women NBA 2K players to discuss how their eligibility for the NBA 2K League Draft can be improved (NBA 2K League, 2021). Similarly, a new woman’s FIFA esports event was announced in 2022 in an attempt to provide a platform for women players and help organisers identify talented women players (Barshop, 2022). Future research should therefore investigate whether such initiatives present viable solutions to problems related to social inclusion in esports.

Implications

Although esports has been thought to have great potential in terms of fostering inclusive and bias-free competition due to the perceived lack of physicality involved, the findings in this thesis suggest that sports-themed esports is not exempt from the

gendered biases and exclusionary practices that girls and women face in other forms of sports. However, due to the virtual nature of esports, gendered stereotypes often play out in more complex and covert ways within the online environments of esports (Kruthika, 2020). Nevertheless, the body is always reintroduced and rendered meaningful in virtual worlds as well (Sundén, 2003). All too often, esports is imagined as an individualistic and meritocratic activity where everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed (Harper, 2010). Subsequently, the under-representation of women is often interpreted as an indication that women lack the necessary skills and/or dedication to succeed in esports. However, discussions about women's participation in esports often fail to recognise the social and structural barriers that shape access and opportunity in esports and how they are influenced by the corporeal situatedness of the players. Given the continuing merging of esports and traditional sports, these are aspects that esports and sports stakeholders need to take into consideration if esports is to become an equal and accepted part of sport.

Moreover, the ways in which discourses on esports and gender are used in the construction of mediated representations of women are important in the overall reproduction of gender stereotypes (Carter & Steiner, 2004; Ross & Padovani, 2017). Despite a slow increase in the representation of women as players and game characters in sports-themed esports, the findings in Articles III and IV indicate that media representations of women have so far been unable to challenge established gender stereotypes in this area. According to Hovden and von der Lippe (2019), future shifts towards a greater inclusion of women in sports necessitate that women and men are represented equally and given similar social acknowledgement. Thus, the media representations of women in sports-themed esports examined in this thesis contribute to maintaining the status quo by confining themselves to dominant binary gendered logics (Weedon, 1997).

The prevalence and proliferation of gendered stereotypes in esports are worrying because they have been found to have a significant negative influence on women

players' experiences and performances (Shen et al., 2016; Vermeulen et al., 2016). For instance, Kaye and Pennington (2016) observed that when women players were told that women could not perform as well as men, their performances were rated much lower than those of women players who were not provided with this information. Similar negative influences of gender stereotypes have also been observed in other physical and sport activities (Gentile et al., 2018) and in other non-physical competitions, such as chess (Maass et al., 2007). Furthermore, research has revealed how the prevalence of gender stereotypes often leads to the discrimination of women in the form of discriminatory language and hostile behaviour towards women players (Darvin et al., 2020; Gray 2012). This is also confirmed in the findings of Articles I and III. The reviewed research in Article I suggests that such online gender hostility forms a powerful exclusion mechanism that may discourage women from either playing at all or hiding their gender by remaining anonymous. Professional players, on the other hand, do not have the option of anonymity. In the light of the social issues and exclusionary mechanisms that the articles in this thesis point to, it is critical for esports and sports stakeholders to consider how sports-themed esports can provide a safer and more equal and inclusive sporting space for all players (Kruthika, 2020; Pack & Hedlund, 2020; Taylor, 2012).

Separate leagues and tournaments for men and women players have been put forward by several stakeholders and scholars as a potential way of addressing the numerous challenges concerning gender in esports. It is argued that separate competitions may provide women players with a more conducive environment in which they can develop their skills and connect with other women players (Kruthika, 2020; Taylor, 2012). However, such competitions have also been criticised by many for maintaining the gendered and potentially exclusionary division between men and women that (in theory) should not be necessary in non-physical esports (Taylor, 2012). At the same time, esports practice is never truly disembodied, since the virtual onscreen representations of the players are always closely linked to their physical bodies

(Bromseth & Sundén, 2011; Sundén & Svenningson, 2011). Therefore, gender-separation can also be interpreted as a form of inclusion in that it prevents women players' integration into unequal and exclusive frameworks (Frisby & Ponc, 2013; Taylor, 2012). For instance, in chess, another example of a non-physical form of sport, women-only tournaments have already proved to be an effective way of promoting gender inclusion. Although most major chess tournaments are open to all players independent of gender, separate women's tournaments have been shown to make players more visible in the media, benefit financially from competing in championships and increased sponsor opportunities and make it easier to connect with other women players (Root, 2020). While separate women's tournaments and divisions have also been commonplace in esports, such alternatives are often not included in sports-organised esports events. As a result, sport stakeholders organising esports events need take into account the additional problems and barriers that women players face by developing more progressive models of equitable gender relations, rather than maintaining existing ones that largely ignore such issues.

However, not all women esports players agree that separation is the right solution to the challenges that women face in these environments. As demonstrated by early feminist researchers, women have always been able to find ways to negotiate the pervading masculine nature of gaming environments and acknowledge their femininity and identity (e.g., Corneliussen, 2008; Mortensen, 2003; Nardi, 2010; Pearce & Artemesia, 2012; Sundén, 2003; Sundén & Svenningson, 2012; Taylor, 1999, 2003). Esports competitions that are open to all genders may also provide important spaces in which women are able to construct opposing meanings and identities that may challenge the masculine nature of esports environments (Kennedy, 2006). It is also important to note that gender-separation does not directly address the hostile and exclusionary nature of esports that makes gender division necessary in the first place, namely the underrepresentation of women, online harassment and gender stereotypes faced by women players (Kruthika, 2020). Thus, gender division can also

be interpreted as a quick fix to a much deeper structural problem in the esports industry (Kruthika, 2020). However, issues of social exclusion are not always easy to address, as they have multiple causes that are frequently intertwined with other social issues. They can rarely be solved by single organisations alone, and clear solutions are usually hard to identify (Frisby & Ponc, 2013). In the case of the convergence of sports and esports, this thesis highlights a need for change and renewal in how participation in esports is structured and organised in order to meet the principles and values of traditional sports regarding equal and fair participation for all genders. If the goal is to create more inclusive and equal environments in sports-themed esports, then developing solutions that enable bottom-up approaches, exchanges and collaborations across various sports organisations, game producers and esports leagues will be critical to success.

Conclusive remarks

The thesis has examined the following main research question: “How do gendered power relations reflect gender (in)equality in sports-themed esports?” This question is addressed in four separate studies, each led by individual underlying research questions that aim to examine how gender (in)equality in sports-themed esports is reflected in previous research (Article I), sports policy (Article II), the media (Article III) and esports audience interpretations (Article IV). Although esports is often imagined as a virtual form of sport that may have great potential in terms of gender equality, the findings in this study reveal that sports-themed esports functions as a site that reproduces the notions of hegemonic and athletic masculinity that are often found in traditional sports. As a result, the gender inequalities that are commonly associated with traditional sports are reproduced at various levels in and around sports-themed esports spaces, thus illustrating how online bodies are never disconnected from dominant gender discourses or the physical bodies of the players.

As always, the research has several limitations. Perhaps most importantly, no women players have been interviewed during this study due to difficulties related to the global COVID-19 pandemic. Despite this, my findings do provide insights into how gendered power relations and stereotypes are reflected in gender inequalities in sports-themed esports environments and have significant consequences for women players in terms of identity construction and spaces of opportunity. Future research could expand the focus on the integration of esports into traditional sports organisations by focusing on other genres of esports or actors in non-playing roles. Importantly, future research should focus on collaborative efforts with key stakeholders, such as players, sport leaders, esports competition organisers and esports coaches and managers, in order to identify practical solutions for increasing the opportunities of women players and other marginalised player groups in gaming and esports at all levels of participation, from casual gaming to professional esports.

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THE ARTICLES

Article I

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Article II

Rogstad, E. T., Błaalid, B., & Tjønnndal, A. (2021). Who are included? A gender perspective on the IOC's strategy for esports in the Olympics. In A. Tjønnndal (Ed.), *Idrett, kjønn og ledelse: festskrift til Jorid Hovden* (pp. 211-228). Fagbokforlaget.

Article III

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Article IV

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ARTICLE I

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Gender in eSports research: a literature review

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ABSTRACT

The popularity of eSports has skyrocketed recently, prompting increasing academic attention. However, reflecting the male-dominated reality of the eSports industry, most research is focused on men. Decades of research on gender in the context of technology and computer gaming present a valid cause for concern regarding how women and other minority individuals in these settings have been and remain oppressed. This article presents a traditional narrative review of how the theoretical concept of hegemonic masculinity is used to understand gendered power inequalities in eSports in the research literature. The review reveals that research that focuses on gender and eSports revolves around three main themes: (1) issues of the construction of masculinity, (2) online harassment, and (3) negotiations of gendered expectations. Based on a discussion of gendered power inequalities within these themes, the review concludes that although eSports and traditional sports are clearly different, they discursively link masculinity, athleticism, and competition very similarly. This has significant implications for women and minority players, which in turn calls for more research on how masculinity is regaining dominance despite the increasing participation of girls and women within eSports.

Abbreviation list:

ESA - Entertainment Software Association
LAN - Local Area Network

KEYWORDS

eSports; gender;
discrimination; sexism;
women eSports players

Introduction

Since emerging in the 1990s, the popularity of eSports – organised competitive gaming – has grown enormously in recent years. Indeed, Newzoo, a global games market research publisher, predicted that the eSports industry's income would surpass the billion-dollar mark by 2020, with 495 million spectators worldwide (Rietkerk, 2020). Unlike traditional sports, in which men are often considered to have a physical advantage over women, physical attributes are unrelated to high performance in eSports,

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allowing both men and women to compete in the same events (Shen et al., 2016; Paaßen et al., 2017). According to Hemphill (1995), "Cyberspace holds out the possibility that new forms of sport participation and sociality can be created in terms of game-making, game-playing, and norm-making within games" (p. 58). However, in terms of gender issues related to sexism and exclusion, eSports is no exception (e.g. Ruvalcaba et al., 2018; Ratan et al., 2015; Taylor, 2012). Indeed, the eSports industry is heavily male-dominated, with women representing a lower proportion of participants, fans, and leaders (Entertainment Software Association [ESA], 2018). Studies show that women comprise 35% of eSports players (Interpret, 2019), but only 5% of professional players (Hilbert, 2019), which means that women players rarely compete at the top-most level of eSports.

Reflecting on the lack of women in eSports, research has primarily focused on male participants. Therefore, it is important to map and examine factors that contribute to the lower proportion of women within eSports environments. Decades of research on gender in relation to technology and computer gaming present ample reason for concern regarding how women and other minorities have become and remain culturally, socially, and economically repressed (Jenson & de Castell, 2011; 2013; 2015). Factors like professionalisation, marketing, and entrepreneurialism in digital gameplay also contribute to marginalisation in this field (Jenson & de Castell, 2018). These factors are increasingly apparent in eSports activities, as they represent a major cultural shift from casual gamers who play just for fun to full-time professional "players" who compete for a living (Jenson & de Castell, 2018).

It is important to note that the discussion of gender and eSports is constructed within larger cultural and research discussions about gender, gameplay, and technology. In a review of international research on gender and technology spanning three decades, Jane Abbiss (2008) suggests that accounts of pervasive gender disparities in computer access, use, and behaviours have contributed to the perception that computing is a masculine practice. Other scholars have claimed that one reason for many women deliberately opposing involvement in masculinised technologies like computers is that it challenges their feminine identities and that these technologies have been classified as practices suitable for men (see Cockburn, 1992; Wajcman, 1991; Schofield, 1995).

Massanari (2017) characterised video games as part of a wider, toxic techno-culture that depends on "an othering of those perceived as outside the culture ... and a valorization of masculinity masquerading as a particular form of 'rationality'" (p. 5). Furthermore, Taylor (2008) described a web of stereotypical and sexualized practices, from promotion of video games to portrayal of male and female characters within the games (see also Behm-Morawitz 2014; Ivory 2009; Lynch et al., 2016). Therefore, as Jenson and de Castell (2018) argued hegemonic masculinity is supported and valorised through such techno-cultural communities to "ideologically legitimate the global subordination of women to men" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). Similarly, Taylor (2012) suggested that eSports players reflected the characteristics of traditional athletic masculinity, overlooking the focus on physical abilities.

Utilising a traditional narrative review approach to current academic research conducted on gender and eSports, this article explores the use of the concept of

hegemonic masculinity in the eSports literature. More specifically, the review addresses the following research question: How is the theoretical concept of hegemonic masculinity used in the literature to understand gendered power inequalities in eSports?

First, a thematic analysis is used to identify the most common themes in research focused on gender and eSports. Following this process, the resulting themes are presented, and the main findings in this field of study are described. Finally, how the gendered inequalities and power relations found within these themes can be said to align with hegemonial forms of masculinity and power commonly found in traditional sports is discussed.

However, since the concept of hegemonic masculinity has been primarily used to study masculinity; femininity still remains under-conceptualised in gender research (Budgeon, 2014; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Therefore, this review adopts an alternative interpretation of hegemonic masculinity provided by Mimi Schippers (2007), presented in the following section.

Theoretical framework: hegemonic masculinity

Since proposed by Raewyn Connell (1987;1995), the concept of "hegemonic masculinity" has been a major component of the growing field of critical masculinity studies. Within a broad range of disciplines, it has proven to be essential to the understanding of masculinities and how unequal gender relations are legitimated worldwide (Messerschmidt, 2019). Connell (1995) defined hegemonic masculinity as the "configuration of gender practice that embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (p. 77). Despite being formulated almost three decades ago, Messerschmidt (2019) argues that Connell's original focus on the legitimisation of unequal gender relations is still relevant in the field of critical masculinity research.

Addressing the role of hegemonic masculinity in sports, Connell (1987) asserted that "in Western countries ... images of ideal masculinity are constructed and promoted most systematically through competitive sports" (pp. 84–85). Studies of traditional sports indicate that sporting spaces are typically characterised by male dominance and masculine hegemony, resulting in discrimination, sexism, and the marginalisation of women as participants, leaders, and fans (e.g. Bryson, 1987; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013).

Connell's (1987; 1995) original work was heavily concentrated around hegemonic forms of masculinity with just a few mentions of femininity, and then only based on its connection to masculinity. Since all forms of femininity are formed in relation to male domination, there is no place for hegemonic femininity, Connell (1987) argues. Instead, Connell (1987) presents the concept of "emphasized femininity," which is created in opposition to hegemonic masculinity and is centred upon internalised subordination and subjugation in connection with dominant forms of masculinity. After being subjected to a number of serious criticisms, misconceptions, and misapplications, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) reformulated the concept of hegemonic masculinity which also included a more complex model of gender hierarchy and

highlighted the agency of women. Despite this, some authors claim that femininity remains under-conceptualised in the field of gender studies (Paechter, 2018; Budgeon, 2014; Schippers, 2007; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

The heterosexuality-based co-construction framework proposed by Mimi Schippers (2007) provides a valuable alternative to emphasised femininity. Building on Connell's (1987; 1995), publications, Schippers positions the relationality of masculinity and femininity at the forefront of thinking about the validity of gender hegemony. According to Schippers (2007, p. 90), the "qualities members of each gender category should and are assumed to possess are contained within the interpretations of organised gendered relationships; therefore, it is in the idealized quality content of the categories 'man' and 'woman' that we find the hegemonic significance of masculinity and femininity." Thus, conceptualising the relationship between masculinity *and* femininity becomes central in order to understand the validity of gender hegemony, according to Schippers.

This alternative model of hegemonic masculinity allows the study of various constructions of masculinity and femininity and their influences for gender hegemony by focusing on relationality between masculinity and femininity (Schippers, 2007). As a result, Messerschmidt et al. (2020) argue any emerging constructions of femininities become essential to comprehending historical variation in emphasised femininities as well as the reproduction of gender inequality. Recent feminist research suggests that the dominant construction of gender among young women in the global North today is associated with the "heterosexy athlete" – an identity connected with beauty and heterosexual attractiveness combined with gender traits like personal independence, ambition, competitiveness, and athleticism – rather than the embodied practices like submissiveness, docility, and passivity represented in Connell's description of emphasised femininity (Paechter, 2018; Budgeon, 2014; McRobbie, 2009). However, Messerschmidt (2020) argues that gender hegemony remains relevant as no constructions of hybrid femininity yet have resulted in a restructuring or breakdown of hierarchical gender relations.

Method: a traditional narrative review

Procedure and sample

A list of keywords was used to direct the identification of relevant research on eSports and gender: eSports, competitive gaming/video games, electronic/virtual/digital sports, gender, male/female/men/boys/girls, masculinity, and femininity. These were used to search Google Scholar, EBSCOhost, Scopus, and Web of Science. The search was restricted to peer-reviewed English and Scandinavian language papers, anthologies, and doctoral dissertations published from 2006 to 2020. The search was conducted between January 2020 and May 2020. The initial searches returned 3980 results for Google Scholar, 1462 results for EBSCOhost, 305 results for Scopus, and 220 results for Web of Science. However, most of the results did not focus on both eSports and gender as the main research theme.

Therefore, further measures were utilised to identify relevant papers. Papers referring to reviews, citations, and conference proceedings were omitted in subsequent

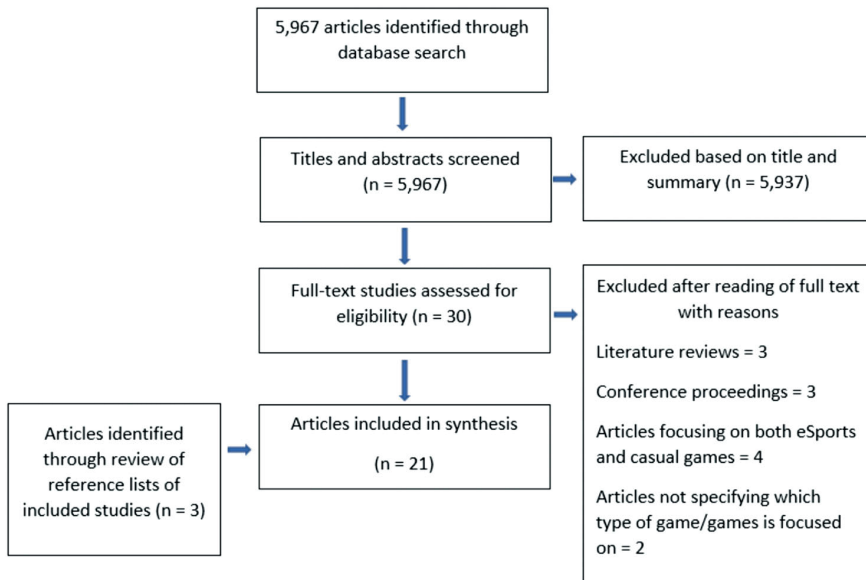


Figure 1. Selection of studies.

searches. Works that only mention eSports and gender but do not examine them as their research objectives were also excluded. Studies focusing on competitive video gaming and more casual games that are not considered eSports, and those that did not specify the type of games or game titles examined were similarly excluded. The citations of the remaining studies were used to extend the search (Figure 1). As presented in Table 1, the final sample comprised 21 relevant papers.

Analysis

This study utilised a thematic analysis to identify common themes within the reviewed literature (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Three primary themes were identified: masculinities in eSports, online harassment, and negotiating gendered expectations. The identified papers were categorised according to their major focus, which was identified by analysing their titles, abstracts, and keywords. Theoretical analyses of the concepts, characteristics, or consequences of masculinities in eSports environments, including the various types of masculinities and femininities in the competitive gaming environment, were categorised under ‘masculinities in eSports.’ Articles focusing on negative experiences related to gender stereotyping and gender-based harassment within competitive gaming spaces were categorised under ‘online harassment.’ Finally, papers concentrating on the complex and diverse range of gendered expectations, identities, performances, and variations in eSports were categorised under negotiating gendered expectations. The final distribution of the selected papers is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Final sample of reviewed studies.

Author/Year	Publication	Theme	Method	Key findings
Kennedy (2006)	Book chapter	Masculinities in eSports	Qualitative	Identified perceptions of appropriate feminine behaviour and pleasure for women Quake players.
Taylor et al. (2009)	Journal article	Masculinities in eSports	Qualitative	Women's involvement in the organisation, promotion, and performance of competitive gaming are read in largely stereotypical terms.
Taylor (2012)	Book chapter	Masculinities in eSports	Conceptual	Identified diversity at work among men in game culture and how these gender identities relationally construct those of women.
Witkowski (2013)	Book chapter	Masculinities in eSports	Qualitative	Identified various behavioural patterns of peripheral eSports players as an alternative expression of masculinity: 'eventful masculinities.'
Vermeulen et al. (2014)	Journal article	Masculinities in eSports	Experimental	Found that women players had higher perceived stress levels and lower self-evaluation scores compared with men.
Voorhees (2015)	Book chapter	Masculinities in eSports	Qualitative	Argued that the eSports scene is not a clash of rival masculinities but a hybridisation representing the most economic combination of skills and abilities necessary to succeed.
Jenson and de Castell (2018)	Journal article	Masculinities in eSports	Qualitative	Illustrated how recent and evolving gameplay economies are exacerbating the separation between men and women players instead of facilitating the opening up of the playing field.
Xue et al. (2019)	Journal article	Masculinities in eSports	Qualitative	Gamers frequently use Reddit to support gender- and investment-based inclusion/exclusion dominated politics while sharing personal thoughts and experiences.
Darvin et al. (2020)	Journal article	Masculinities in eSports	Quantitative	Women participating in eSports reported experiencing discrimination more frequently, while men reported experiencing hostility more frequently.
Kuznekoff and Rose (2013)	Journal article	Online harassment	Experimental	Found that the use of a female voice in online video game competitions received three times more negative feedback than a male or no voice.
Ratan et al. (2015)	Journal article	Online harassment	Mixed methods	While women players develop abilities at the same pace as men, there is still a scarcity of women players.
Ruvalcaba et al. (2018)	Journal article	Online harassment	Mixed methods	Women have mixed experiences in online gaming and suffer more sexual harassment than men.
Arneberg and Hegna (2018)	Journal article	Online harassment	Qualitative	The language used in online gaming contributes to the exclusion of femininity in gaming culture while facilitating the development of masculine roles.

(continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Author/Year	Publication	Theme	Method	Key findings
Siutila and Havaste (2019)	Book chapter	Online harassment	Qualitative	Found that all-female teams are considered to lack dedication, have ulterior motives for playing and threaten the perceived meritocracy of eSports.
Beavis and Charles (2007)	Journal article	Negotiating gendered expectations	Qualitative	Demonstrated that LAN cafés are particularly amenable to reformative work on gendered gaming identities.
Zolides (2015)	Journal article	Negotiating gendered expectations	Qualitative	Unlike men eSport players, women players must carefully negotiate and perform their gender while trying to maintain competitiveness within a highly masculine culture.
Cullen (2018)	Journal article	Negotiating gendered expectations	Conceptual	Discussed post-feminism on feminism and meritocracy in gaming culture.
Witkowski (2018)	Book chapter	Negotiating gendered expectations	Qualitative	Discussed how women navigate and perform in the masculine spaces and practices of expert-level play.
Voorhees and Orlando (2018)	Book chapter	Negotiating gendered expectations	Qualitative	Identified forms of manliness and how they re-entrench the toxic, hegemonic model of masculinity typical of game culture but also allow new opportunities for preventing more pathological configurations of masculine identity.
Zhu (2018)	Book chapter	Negotiating gendered expectations	Qualitative	Demonstrated how the superiority of Eastern players has led Western players to generate a radicalised discourse that ignores forms of masculinity based on the body, creating another problematic form of masculinity in its place.
(Schelfhout et al., 2021)	Journal article	Negotiating gendered expectations	Qualitative	Discussed how the discourse surrounding the first woman to compete in a major Hearthstone event centred on her woman identity and dismissed her accomplishments.

Results

The literature review comprised 21 peer-reviewed studies published in English. The following sections identify the main findings of the reviewed papers according to the three thematic categories extracted from the studies: masculinities in eSports, online harassment, and negotiating gendered expectations.

Masculinities in eSports

To understand gender in professional gaming, it is essential to understand how masculinity is constructed in this sporting space (Taylor, 2012). As noted, masculinities reflect cultural values, dominant ideologies, and embodied practices (Connell &

Messerschmidt, 2005). However, the reviewed literature indicates that the construction of masculinity within game culture is difficult to determine. Indeed, while some gaming communities are overtly misogynistic and homophobic, others are formed by women, queerness, and the playful reappropriation of conventional gender identities (Taylor, 2012). eSports communities also differ based on the game title, platform, competition format, player requirements, and culture.

Among the reviewed studies, Taylor (2012) suggests that masculinity in professional gaming environments is influenced by two concepts: 'geek masculinity' and 'athletic masculinity.' According to Taylor (2012), geek masculinity is a specific alternate identity created in technology and computer gaming. Contrary to the dominant hegemonic masculinity in sports, geek masculinity has traditionally reflected a marginalised form of masculinity (Connell, 1995). For many gamers, retaining a 'geek' identity is crucial for maintaining their sense of seriousness, focus, and intensity. These players are also less invested in reifying hegemonic masculinity. For others, the quest to valorise eSports links it to athletics. Taylor (2012) argues that the status of masculinity in eSports is woven into a battle to normalise a new twist on hegemonic masculinity, that is, to demonstrate that "real men" can play computer games.

A review of the literature reveals that there is no single type of masculinity or femininity within eSports. Gender identities change as a wider audience participates in competitive computer gaming (Taylor et al., 2009; Witkowski, 2013; Voorhees, 2015). This development can be seen in the chronological progress of the research, with early research focusing on the scarce participation of women in gaming (Bryce & Rutter, 2002) as well as the limited kinds of positionalities made available for those participating, with mothers present describing themselves as "cheerleaders," women players at risk of being labelled as "halo hoes," and promotional models being known as "booth babes" (Taylor et al., 2009). Although the marginalisation of women still persists, more recent research has focused on a broader and more nuanced range of gendered identities and practices performed by both men and women players (see the section on negotiating gendered expectations). In this respect, players align with different forms of gendered identities. According to Witkowski (2013), the idealised performance of masculinity within eSports is tied to the high-performing male player:

He is tough and competitive; he is heterosexual (and typically white); he is lean, he performs with bravado and shows zero tolerance for flaws. He is the image of the North American digital sporting hero marketed to young male gamers engaging with electronic sports. (p. 217)

However, as Witkowski (2013) noted, not all players and eSports stages match such a perfect gender-manufacturing model, nor do they all involve themselves in this model. The nuanced performances of the players observed by Witkowski (2013) and their retexturing of masculinities offer an alternate practice of high-performance competition that includes finesse alongside mastery, geekdom enhanced by competitive 'good games' and 'co-ed' game space, and little 'trash-talking' on the sidelines.

Meanwhile, Voorhees (2015) argued against the description of masculinity in eSports as a site of struggle with conflicting efforts to align eSports with hegemonic and geek masculinity. According to Voorhees (2015), the performance of sportive gameplay is not a clash of rival masculinities but a hybridisation representing the

combination of skills and abilities needed to succeed in eSports. Voorhees (2015) contended that the sportification of digital games and the professionalisation of gaming contribute to the production of a form of subjectivity characterised by technological mastery, economic rationality, and the celebration of violence, which he terms 'neoliberal masculinity.' Neoliberal masculinity is characterised by subjects who embrace whichever traits a cost-benefit analysis determines will best allow them to sell their labour (Voorhees, 2015).

Several of the selected studies argued that the construction of masculinity in eSports has real and powerful consequences for women's access to professional and leisure gaming spaces (Taylor, 2012; Vermeulen et al., 2014; Jenson & de Castell, 2018; Xue et al., 2019). The collision of ideologies surrounding gender, technology, and sports places women gamers in an incredibly precarious position (Taylor, 2012; Zolides, 2015; Ruvalcaba et al., 2018), particularly insofar as they need to manage and cope with both the practical problems of simply being a player and the added obstacles that women experience in eSports contexts. Indeed, players known to be women can find themselves mediating expectations of otherness or 'female masculinity' (Halberstam, 1998). Corrective cues meant to bolster feminine expressions of gender, such as images and avatars meant to indicate sexual prowess or mentions of interests, hobbies, and practices reflecting more traditional feminine values are not unusual (Witkowski, 2018). This does not mean that women on the eSports scene are presenting intentional or inauthentic self-representations. Indeed, traditional signs of femininity may overlap with woman gaming and geekdom (Taylor, 2012). It is also used deliberately as a strategy to deal with the chauvinism and prejudices undermining women gamers (Kennedy, 2006).

The number of women in eSports has increased in recent years, with women proving themselves to be highly capable competitors (Jenson & de Castell, 2018; Cullen, 2018). However, many underlying gender disparity issues are maintained or exacerbated because of spectatorship rivalry overtaking conventional gaming incentives (Jenson & de Castell, 2018). Jenson and de Castell (2018) suggested that it is not enough to reduce the gender gap in eSports. Even as women are becoming increasingly visible participants in eSports, critical reviews of the relative cost and benefits of players' involvement is necessary to gain a deeper understanding of how the dominance of masculinity is resurging.

Women are often marginalised in terms of their access to communities through which they might develop their skills (Taylor, 2008). In every sport, being able to compete with people slightly above your skill level is essential to improvement. If women players cannot access meaningful challenges that allow them to develop their skills, they will not be able to compete at the same level as male competitors who can develop their professional skills as a result of their access to more robust networks and the easier occupation of gamer identity (Taylor, 2012). The objectification of women and use of sexist language, including sexually harassing trash talk, have become part of masculinity that simultaneously inhabits traditional forms of male privilege while shedding the outsider status and marginalisation to which geek identity has long been subjected (Taylor, 2012). As many of the competitive settings for eSports players are based on online environments shielded by anonymity, gender-based discrimination and hostility are likely to ensue (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018).

Online harassment

Several of the selected studies revealed that women gamers face different expectations, receptions, and feedback from competitors compared with male gamers (Kuznekoff & Rose, 2013; Ratan et al., 2015; Ruvalcaba et al., 2018). Women are generally considered a minority in eSports; research indicates that they frequently encountered general and sexual harassment from other players (Kuznekoff & Rose, 2013; Ruvalcaba et al., 2018). Previous studies indicate that the combination of anonymity, lack of direct repercussions, high frequency of banter, and a competitive gaming culture in which players' thoughts and feelings are expressed loudly often causes players to become more hostile and violent (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018). For example, Ruvalcaba et al. (2018) found that while women players were 1.82 times more likely to receive sexual remarks, women streamers were 10.55 times more likely to receive sexual remarks. Examining reactions to men's and women's voices in eSports, Kuznekoff and Rose (2013) found that women's voices received three times more negative comments than a male voice or no voice.

Stereotype threat research demonstrated that, like traditional sport, cuing derogatory perceptions around women and gaming impacted women's achievements in online gaming (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018). One possible consequence of a social climate hostile towards women was that women players will have less confidence in their abilities compared with male players (Ratan et al., 2015; Arneberg & Hegna, 2018). Factors, such as online abuse and harassment may prevent women players from developing their self-confidence, resulting in their becoming trapped in a destructive cycle wherein they perceive themselves as outsiders to gaming culture and are discouraged from competitive play, consequently reinforcing these stereotypes (Ratan et al., 2015).

Women players have utilised various strategies in response to the hostile environment of competitive gaming. A common strategy was hiding their gender from other players, including choosing gender-neutral gamertags and not using microphone features or a voice changer for conversation (Taylor, 2012; Arneberg & Hegna, 2018). However, revealing one's gender is unavoidable at a professional level. Some women players took a more aggressive approach *via* acculturation, adopting powerful usernames, participating in banter and 'trash talk,' and adopting more in-your-face behaviour and misogynistic taunting (Taylor, 2012). According to Kennedy (2006), women who preferred this approach were not simply 'aping masculinity' but partaking in something more comparable to the mythical 'monstrous feminine,' an opposing feminine identification within the gaming community. Consequently, these women players conceived themselves as opposing hegemonic depictions of femininity and the patriarchal portrayal of the gaming community and players in general (Kennedy, 2006).

Negotiating gendered expectations

Despite the continued harassment of women players in online spaces, diverse and socially shaped gendered identities have emerged across eSports (Witkowski, 2018). Minorities, including women players, are forced to find ways to navigate and perform across the male and masculine dominated spaces and practices of eSports. Several of the selected studies explore the nuanced spectrum of gendered identities in eSports.

With the growing commercialisation of eSports, participants in competitions are becoming more professional and celebritised (Zolides, 2015). However, participating in competitions and tournaments is only a small part of a professional eSports player's income, which rests on building their brand. The commodification of professional gamers involves a complicated system of sponsorship deals, team memberships, and online reputation management (Zolides, 2015). The most popular gaming competitions are primarily aimed at a male audience, particularly as competitive gaming culture is closely related to the overall masculinisation of video gaming (Zolides, 2015). Therefore, gender is a key element in the identity formation of professional gamers, with women facing additional barriers and challenges in developing and maintaining their brand and influence (Zolides, 2015). Many women gamers felt a need to maintain their womanhood while preserving their position as legitimate opponents for a predominantly male audience. This performativity in a largely male-dominated culture placed women in a difficult situation in terms of making a steady income and creating their identity as women players (Zolides, 2015).

To make a living as successful gamers both during and after their active careers, players need to develop a specific professional identity in the eSports industry. In professional gaming, creating a commodified self involves advanced interaction between the individual and institution, personal identity and platform, and reputation and community (Zolides, 2015). This can be achieved in several ways. For instance, women players can emit what Taylor (2012) calls 'compensatory signals' – various signs and cues intended to reiterate the player's gender in this heavily male-dominated environment. Such signals might involve mentioning hobbies or interests reflecting conformity with more traditional femininity or, conversely, a more aggressive and traditional masculine stance confirming their belonging. Some women enacted both ends of the spectrum, adopting both hyper-feminine and masculine traits (Taylor, 2012).

Recent studies have focused on how eSports players behave in relation to gender norms. For instance, Cullen (2018) demonstrated how the South Korean player Kim 'Geguri' Se-yeon – the first woman to compete in the highest tier of the popular game, *Overwatch* – actively distanced herself from femininity after being hailed a feminist gaming icon following her success in *Overwatch*. Cullen (2018) suggested that 'Geguri' expressed a post-feminist sensitivity that focuses on individual freedom and inspires women players to pay less attention to systemic inequality – a sensitivity well-aligned with the meritocracy of eSports. Many of the women adhering to post-feminism have experienced a need to refuse feminism to be successful in competitive gaming environments (Cullen, 2018).

Scholars have also examined how male players perform gender in the eSports scene. While Voorhees and Orlando (2018) found signs of technological superiority overlapping with a sportive, militaristic masculinity in a professional all-male CS: GO team, they also observed how team members took the role of an 'outsider, everyman, team mother, boyish joker, and dandy' (p. 211). Although masculinity configurations serve to reinforce the toxic, hegemonic model of masculinity commonly found in gaming culture, they also present opportunities to reject more pathological constructions of masculinity.

This line of research is beginning to provide insights into how eSports is influenced by cross-gender competition as players negotiate gendered expectations. This heavily stereotypical male environment and its promotion of heteronormative conduct also constrained the self-presentation of male players (Zolides, 2015), with several studies demonstrating how male players negotiated gendered expectations in the eSports scene (e.g. Voorhees & Orlando, 2018; Zhu, 2018). Nonetheless, male players experienced greater parallels between their gendered and gamer identities, promoting social identification and self-stereotyping among male players (Taylor, 2012; Zolides, 2015). This was unlikely for women players (Taylor, 2012); as their gendered identity contrasted with their gamer identity, women were less likely to associate themselves with the image of the stereotypical gamer. Women players also tended to take gender as an indication of gaming skill (Vermeulen et al., 2014). According to stereotype threat theory, this tendency results from the threat of affirming an unfavourable stereotype as self-characterisation (Steele & Aronson, 1995) and may prevent women players from identifying with the field of play (Steele, 1997).

Discussion: a meta-analysis of gendered power inequalities in eSports

The world of sports provides a fertile arena for addressing questions of hegemony in the form of male dominance and power and the maintenance of that power over women (Grindstaff & West, 2011). Like the sports industry, the eSports industry has largely been organised by and for men, resulting in a highly masculine institution (Witkowski, 2013; Ruvalcaba et al., 2018). The development and categories of eSports games also tend to align with what are traditionally considered masculine activities, such as first-person shooters and sport simulation games (Paaßen et al., 2017). The limited number of women players on the eSports scene has resulted in assumptions that women do not play as often, are less skilled, prefer less competitive formats and features, and ultimately cannot compete at the same level as male players due to inherent gender disparities (Shen et al., 2016). However, this perception has proven to be false (Taylor, 2012; Shen et al., 2016). Rather, the differences between men and women eSports players are caused by other aspects – experiences, cultural assumptions, and other conditions that discourage or prevent women’s involvement (Shen et al., 2016).

Taylor (2012) argued that discussions of gender must not be conflated with discussions of women. While the construction of masculinity is central to understanding gender and professional computer gaming, the status of masculinity in eSports is complex and difficult to pigeonhole, with research findings somewhat conflicting. According to Taylor (2012), the status of masculinity in professional gaming is a struggle between geek masculinity and hegemonic masculinity. Connell (1995) linked sports to the reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity and a form of gender identity typically accompanied by separate and unequal spheres between men and women. In this respect, except for the emphasis on physical abilities, eSports players reflect the values of masculinity in other sports. However, some players embrace forms of geek masculinity while rejecting forms of hegemonic masculinity (Taylor, 2012). Meanwhile, rather than relying on essentialist notions of gender, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005)

suggested that "masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting" (p. 836).

Researchers have explored how eSports players are involved in, orientate themselves towards, and question the idea of hegemonic masculinity in competitive environments. The circumstances in which players are more responsive or reproductive in their role in constructing hegemonic masculinity can be explored by analysing the structures and experiences of eSports (Dworkin & Messner, 2002). It is also important to consider the experiences of players who find themselves 'on the margins' of what is considered hegemonic masculinity. In her study of negotiations of hegemonic sporting masculinities in local area network (LAN) gaming tournaments, Witkowski (2013) followed Halberstam's (1998) suggestion to look beyond white middle-class men in creating an intelligible interpretation of masculinity focusing on players outside the frame of hegemonic masculinity. According to Witkowski (2013), 'players on the margins' are directly connected to how dominant masculinities are perceived, created, and maintained in a situation through the way they conform to or rebel against these forms.

Despite not engaging in the hyper-masculine sports scene, male players are prone to having their personalities 'measured against' the masculinities represented by such a game or sport (Pringle & Hickey, 2010). Consequently, complicity with the evolving masculinity in eSports settings through socially recognisable signs of acceptable masculine display may serve to shield those who are less like the ideal image of male players in these environments. This versatility was established by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), who argue that men can adopt hegemonic masculinity when it is desirable but strategically distance themselves from hegemonic masculinity when necessary. Consequently, "'masculinity" represents not a certain type of man but, rather, a way that men position themselves through discursive practices' (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 841). This makes it particularly difficult to map out players' complicity in hegemonic sporting masculinity, as gender performances are calculated against both local and broader understandings and 'expectations' of heterosexuality, 'manliness,' and forms of geek and athlete identities.

Occurring alongside creations of hegemonic sporting masculinity, the diverse expressions of women participating in eSports are locally prominent, connected with conventional sports, and compatible with the dominance of male physical abilities, fierce competition, and heterosexual vigour (Witkowski, 2018; Taylor, 2012; Messner, 2007). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) framed gender as 'always relational ... [where] patterns of masculinity are socially defined in contradistinction from some model (whether real or imaginary) of femininity' (p. 848). Based on this framing of gender, we can only begin to comprehend the transformative efforts of women engaged in competitive gaming as they do the real work of dismantling the long-established gender relational structures of these environments (Witkowski, 2018).

The anonymous nature of online spaces combined with a low level of gender diversity in eSports tends to generate hostile environments for those who do not fit the stereotype of a traditional eSports gamer (Darvin et al., 2020). This review demonstrates the considerable variations in how men and women players describe their

experiences in eSports concerning discrimination and the experience or creation of hostility (e.g. Darvin et al., 2020; Kuznekoff & Rose, 2013; Ruvalcaba et al., 2018). This is particularly evident in online communication between players in games and on social media (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018). That many women feel the need to mask or mute their voices to avoid harassment and access 'normal' gameplay is connected to how gaming – in terms of capability and recognition – is 'provided' as an activity for men (Witkowski, 2018). Moreover, the causes of sexual harassment in competitive gaming spaces remain uncertain and might be a form of gatekeeping by men guarding their masculine domain. According to Maass et al. (2003), male players who experience their gendered personality as vulnerable are more liable to harass women sexually. Thus, engaging in sexual harassment to strengthen a manly self-image can be understood as reinforcing the premise of hegemonic masculinity in competitive gaming environments.

Connell's (1995) model of masculinity, in which gender is understood as a dynamic process under constant revision, clarifies the double-sided nature of masculinity within game culture (Taylor, 2012). This model links to the work of feminist scholars who have proposed a more nuanced model of situated gender creation and performance (e.g. Butler, 1990; 1993). Researchers are beginning to elucidate this dynamic process of gender in eSports by examining the various ways in which players carefully negotiate gendered expectations in eSports (Zolides, 2015; Cullen, 2018; Voorhees & Orlando, 2018; Witkowski, 2018). Players' understanding and performance of gender are modified according to new social situations and artefacts, relationships, institutions, and cultural practices (Taylor, 2012). Simultaneously, the culture surrounding the participants modifies its formulations of gender categories, with hegemonic masculinity continuing to support patriarchy (Taylor, 2012).

Brownmiller (1984) described femininity as a 'tradition of imposed limitations' (p.14). However, feminine norms are noticeable and almost inevitable in eSports settings (Witkowski, 2018; Taylor, 2012; Ruvalcaba et al., 2018). While access discrimination is typically examined within traditional sports participation, the findings suggest that treatment discrimination is also a problem in eSports environments. Women players face limited access to communities through which they can develop themselves as players. Sometimes they simply lack networks of friends to play with; at the more extreme end, male players refuse to play against women because 'boys don't like losing to girls' (Taylor, 2012, p. 125). As such, eSports rests on the myth of meritocracy, which imagines eSports as a fundamentally individualistic and meritocratic venture. In reality, men and women players generally play on different teams and in separate tournaments because of the manner in which eSports expertise is built up and access to teams is structured (Taylor, 2012). The myth of meritocracy overlooks the way in which structures shape access and opportunity.

Sociological and structural limitations are likely to discourage many women from progressing as players, for example, how prior encounters with negative stereotyping result in people connected with that stereotype accommodating unfavourable assumptions (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Women players may assume that they are only capable of competing in women-only competitions or incapable of competing at all, and thus refrain from participating in open competitions (Ratan et al., 2015). This

serves to perpetuate stereotypes that women cannot compete against men or that they do not belong in such competitions. The direct consequences of sexist feedback, hostility, and discrimination remain underexplored. eSports appear to possess a hyper-masculine culture like traditional sports, including the objectification and exclusion of women. Traditional sports research indicates the significant effects of this culture on women athletes – mental anguish, psychological health deterioration, and a reduction in wellness (Marks et al., 2012) – inferring the potential for similar outcomes in eSports environments. Even as women players become more visible participants in eSports spaces, future studies should continue examining the relative advantages and disadvantages of engagement to develop our understanding of how masculinity maintains a considerable position of power (Jenson & de Castell, 2018).

Conclusion

This article reviewed the current literature on gender and eSports, demonstrating how masculinity in eSports environments is complex and difficult to categorise. Despite clear differences between traditional sports and eSports, the reviewed literature suggests that many eSports environments are shaped by the hegemonic masculinity dominating other sporting contexts. Some studies reviewed in this article argued that this is because the eSports industry is organised by and for men, resulting in a highly masculine environment. The alleged physiological superiority of men over women upon which male domination and privilege are based is not as central to the virtual nature of eSports as it is in other sports. However, skills that are only "masculine" because they are virtual – that is, grounded in long-established traditions of male dominance over video game culture – have taken root in the eSports environment. Traditional sports and eSports thus discursively link masculinity, athleticism, and competition together in very similar ways. Both areas provide justifications for a profoundly imbalanced 'playing field' (Wachs, 2002), wherein assumptions of areas in which women fall short – skill, ambition, desire, and capability – are presented as physical or mental discrepancies between genders and reinforced by discursive, material, and behavioural validations of inferior and secondary roles for women.

Research findings and gender theory have systematically undermined such innate sex-based imbalances, proving them entirely misleading and often completely fabricated 'phantasms' (Butler, 1993) of an oppressive social hierarchy focused on limiting the role of women. However, such conclusions have yet to influence the current circumstances for women engaging in eSports. Moreover, unlike traditional athletes who have institutionalised paths to professionalisation, eSports players typically build their careers independently, negotiating tricky domestic circumstances and forming professional identities *via* player communities. For women, the way to the top is fraught with additional hurdles. According to Taylor (2012), this ongoing struggle is linked to a larger conversation regarding the nature of both 'gamers' and 'athletes' within eSports. If the eSports scene is aligned with the damaging outcomes of hegemonic masculinity, the industry will benefit from analyses of how eSports affects participants to become more inclusive.

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ARTICLE II (English version)

Rogstad, E. T., Błaalid, B., & Tjønndal, A. (2021). Who are included? A gender perspective on the IOC's strategy for esports in the Olympics. In A. Tjønndal (Ed.), *Idrett, kjønn og ledelse: festskrift til Jorid Hovden* (pp. 211-228). Fagbokforlaget.

Who are included? A gender perspective on the IOC's strategy to include esports in the Olympic Games

Egil Rogstad, Bjørnar Blaalid and Anne Tjønndal

In 2018, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) arranged a conference about esports in their headquarters in Lausanne.¹ Representatives from all of the international esports community were invited in addition to national Olympic committees, sports federations, competitors and media (IOC, 2018). During the conference, the president of the IOC, Thomas Bach, announced that the IOC wishes to include esports in the Olympic Games (IOC, 2018). In September the same year, Bach made it crystal clear that this did not include esports games that promote violence, which he described as “killer games”. According to the IOC president, these games do not fall in line with Olympic values (IOC, 2019).

In December of 2019, the board of the IOC gathered in Lausanne in relation with the 8th Olympic Summit, where esports once again was on the agenda. The summit believed it had found a strategy that would include esports in the Olympic Games without contradicting Olympian values. The solution is that the IOC will only consider including sports games (games that simulate sports), thereby omitting the majority of esports games, which belong to different game genres (IOC, 2019). During the summit, the IOC underlined that many games in the sports genre are becoming more physically demanding through innovative, new gaming technology.²

The low level of physical activity associated with esports is an aspect that has often been criticized in discussions regarding the inclusion of esports in sports organizations (Parry, 2019; Tjønndal & Skauge, 2021). By the help of virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technology, technologies that replace visual and audio cues with digital, virtual cues, developers now develop games that require players to make physical movements when they are playing the games (Tjønndal, 2020). This was an important factor in relation with the IOC's strategy of working towards an integration of sports games in the Olympics (IOC, 2019). In the wake of the esports conference and the 8th Olympic Summit, international media were filled with rumors that esports would be included in the Olympic Games already in Paris

¹ The Global Association of International Sports Federations (GAISF) was a co-host.

² This is described in more detail on page XX.

2024. The IOC refuted the rumors: esports would not become a part of the official Olympic schedule in Paris. Simultaneously, the local Paris 2024 organizing committee has stated that they will organize esports competitions and tournaments during the Olympics, as an addition to the Olympic sports events.

A unique aspect of esports as a potentially new Olympic contest is that men and women athletes can compete against each other on equal footing. This potential for gender equality was also underlined during the esports conference in Lausanne (IOC, 2018). It was also highlighted that the physical part of esports is marginal, compared to other Olympic sports. It is not crucial to be tall or short, physically strong or weak, or to have good or poor stamina in order to perform on a high level in sports games. Furthermore, no physiological or biological reasons have been identified to indicate that women should not be able to perform on the same level as men in esports (Shen et al., 2016). This means that esports may become the first Olympic sport where men and women athletes can compete on the same terms in the same contest, battling for the same medals. At the same time, it is a paradox that the IOC wants a technological development of games that will make sports games more physically demanding, simultaneously as the committee highlights the potential for equality that lies in esports' low requirement for strength and stamina. The development towards esports becoming a new Olympic contest also brings with it new dilemmas concerning sports policy and equality. With this in mind, we illuminate the following research question in this chapter: *What gender political dilemmas and equality challenges accompany the IOC's strategy for inclusion of esports (sports games) in the Olympic Games?*

We illuminate this question by exploring the IOC's current strategy for esports in the Olympics. This involves an explorative analytical approach of the public information published about the IOC's plans for esports. Our interpretation of the IOC's esports strategy is based on two main sources: 1) the videotape from the esports forum in 2018 (IOC, 2018) and 2) the press release made after the IOC's 8th summit in 2019 (IOC, 2019). To explore what gender political dilemmas the inclusion of esports in the Olympics may bring, we take existing research on women esports players as a vantage point. Furthermore, we consider the IOC's overarching sports political values and goal for equality. We discuss what dilemmas and opportunities that may arise in relation with equality and gender balance in esports in light of the IOC's strategy for esports in the Olympics. Continuing this paper, we describe the historical development of esports, before presenting existing research on gender balance and equality in esports.

ESPORTS: DEFINITIONS AND HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

Esports is defined in many different ways. For instance, Jonasson and Thiborg (2010) define esports as “competitive (professional) video or computer gaming” (p. 288). An updated and more nuanced definition is developed by Hamari & Sjöblom (2017), who describe esports as “a form of sports where the primary aspects of the sport are facilitated by electronic systems; the input of players and teams as well as the output of the eSports system are mediated by human-computer interfaces” (p. 211). In other words, according to Hamari & Sjöblom, esports is an umbrella term for sports performed through the use of electronic systems.

It is common to categorize esports according to game genre. Some examples of popular game genres are: (1) multiplayer online battle arenas (MOBA), (2), shooting, fighting and war games, (3) strategy games, (4) card games and (5) sports games (SVGs³). Sports games, which is the genre that the IOC plans to include in the Olympic Games, denotes all games that simulate sports. Sports games may focus on individual athletes or teams, as seen for instance in the football game “FIFA” or they may focus on the manager of a team, which is the case in for instance “Football Manager”. Although the biggest sports games franchises such as FIFA (football), NBA 2K (basketball) and Madden NFL (American football) long have been among the best-selling games in the world, sports games are considered as one of the least popular game genres in esports (Mirabito & Kucek, 2019).

The origin of esports can be traced to American arcade games in the early 1970s (Billings & Hou, 2019; Zhouxiang, 2016). Esports likely emerged in Japan and the USA, countries that were pioneers in hosting multiplayer competitions on machines in amusement arcades as well as on gaming consoles. At that time, the aim of the contests were to improve and beat each other’s records. With the introduction of the Internet in 1989 and the technological evolution of home PCs in the early 1990s, competitions expanded to the Internet or so-called Local Area Networks (LAN). Esports communities grew larger parallel to the technological development, particularly in East-Asian countries, and especially in South Korea. The rapid development in South Korea is related to a generally large interest in videogames as well as economic and political factors (Billings & Hou, 2019). South Korean authorities promoted the development of information technology from an early point, which gave most South Korean homes early access to high-quality broadband. Simultaneously, the authorities invested in developing the country’s gaming industry because of demand for a new

³ SVGs is an abbreviation for sports video games.

South Korean entertainment industry in the wake of the Asian financial crisis in 1997 (Mozur, 1994).

In a couple of decades, esports has become a commercial entertainment industry with professional tournaments followed by millions of people across the world. For instance, in 2019, more than 100 million viewers logged in to watch the grand finals of the *League of Legends* World Championship (Stein-Kuehler, 2020). Professional organizers such as World Cyber Games (WCG), Electronic Sport World Cup (ESCW) and Cyberathlete Professional League (CPL), together with international actors and sponsors, have contributed to lifting esports onto the international scene (Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010; Karhulahti, 2017). In line with the growing popularity, the prize money that are up for grabs for the players have increased substantially (Funk et al., 2018). For instance, in 2008 it was possible to win 200 000 Norwegian kroner in a single tournament, whereas today players are battling for prizes of several million Norwegian kroner (Esports Earnings, 2020). The overall prize pool for the 2020 world championship for the MOAB game *Dota 2*, for example, was more than 300 million Norwegian kroner (Esports Earnings, 2020).

GENDER, ESPORTS AND SPORTS GAMES

Dennis Hemphill at Victoria University, Australia, (1995) was one of the first to point out that the digital character of esports may facilitate equality between genders and between able-bodied athletes and para-athletes, in a way that traditional sports are unable to. Hemphill described this potential in 1995: “Cyberspace holds out the possibility that new forms of sport participation and sociality can be created in terms of game-making, game-playing, and norm-making within the game” (Hemphill, 1995, p. 58). However, esports has yet to take advantage of this potential. There is scant research into para-athletes' participation and position in esports, and 23 years after Hemphill's (1995) contribution, another Australian researcher, Emma Witkowski (2018), has summarized the situation for women in esports in the following way:

For women engaging in such expert gaming endeavours, their gender performances (while varied), are made alongside productions of hegemonic sporting masculinity as a gender performance that is locally dominant, associated to traditional sports, and aligned to male body skill superiority, antagonistic competitiveness, and heterosexual virility (Witkowski, 2018, s. 188).

Despite the challenges to equality pointed out by Witkowski (2018), many women engage in casual gaming. The Entertainment Software Association (ESA) estimate that 41 percent of all players of videogames are women (ESA, 2020). In addition, the ESAs report shows that more than 75 percent of players are over 18 years old. Still, young teenage boys are often portrayed as the “average gamer”, and a notion that girls do not like gaming has become widespread (Ratan et al., 2015). The gender balance among professional esports players is, however, more skewed than in gaming generally. Among professional esports players, it has been estimated that women comprise fem percent of the players (Hilbert, 2019). What is the reason, then, why there are so many women gamers but so few women who partake in professional esports? Is professional esports a “modern boy’s club”, which marginalizes women’s participation? Are gaming competitions structured so that they are not attractive to women players? There is still little research on this field, but some international studies do shine a light on these questions.

What causes the skewed gender balance in esports and sports games?

The fact that women constitute a small proportion of esports players has led to speculations that this is caused by women and men having different preferences with respect to game genres, where women prefer social games with a low focus on competition, while men prefer games where there is a clear winner and loser (Taylor, 2012; Shen et al., 2016). Considering Norwegian research on boys' and girls' motivation for physical activity and participation in sports, it is reasonable to assume that there is some truth to these assumptions. Studies of withdrawal from youth sports show that boys to a greater extent are motivated by competing with others than girls are, whereas a sense of social community is more important to girls than boys (Seippel, 2016; Skauge & Rafoss, 2020).

Because there are few women at the top of the podium in international esports competitions, gendered understandings of women as being unable to compete on the same level as men in esports have emerged. These stereotypes have in many cases formed due to outdated understandings of how biological differences between the sexes cause men and women to have different abilities that impact their performance in esports. According to Taylor (2012), this is rooted in vague and stereotypical assumptions that there is a difference between the cognitive skills of women and men. As an example, Taylor (2012) describes the assumption that men are better than women at shooting games because men in ancient times

were hunters while women were gatherers (Taylor, 2012). This type of essentialist explanations is based on the idea that biology make women weaker when it comes to sports (Hovden, 2005). The explanations of gendered gaming interests and biological gender differences used to explain the underrepresentation of women in esports have, however, been rejected by research. Newer research show that the skewed gender balance in esports likely stem from other factors, such as: (1) differences in the amount of gaming experience (Shen et al., 2016), (2) cultural and gendered expectations to gaming as a leisure activity (Darvin et al., 2020) and (3) harassment, discrimination and other circumstances hindering women from becoming as engaged in esports as men (Jenson & de Castell, 2018).

The low proportion of women in esports may be related to the fact that most esports organizations are created by and for men. Paaßen et al. (2017) argues that this results in a community that reproduces masculin dominance. Feminist sports research has shown that sports dominated by men often may bring with them a social community that marginalizes women's participation and opportunities (Hovden, 2012; Tjønndal & Hovden, 2020; Channon & Phipp, 2017). Women constitute a minority in esports, making them subject to harassment from other players and audiences. This means that women players face different expectations and receive other types of feedback from other players and audiences compared to men players (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018).

Negative comments on their body and threats of sexual violence is something women esports players often experience, whereas men esports players to a low degree are subject to the same treatment (Ask, Svendsen and Karlstrøm, 2016). For instance, Ruvalcaba et al. (2018) showed in a study that it is ten times more likely for women streamers⁴ to receive comments of a sexual character compared to men. Sexualization and objectification of the female sports body is neither a new phenomenon nor a problem exclusive to esports. In her academic work, Jorid Hovden highlighted how women in sports are subjected to double-sided gender codes (Hovden & von der Lippe, 2017; Hovden, 2010). By this, Hovden (2010) means that women athletes are supposed to be attractive from a male heterosexual viewpoint. Ruvalcaba and colleagues' (2018) study may suggest that sports' double-sided gender codes also constitute a challenge for equality in esports.

⁴ A streamer is a person who broadcasts herself by sharing video, picture and/or sound of herself. Streaming has become a popular activity among gamers to connect with audiences, achieve recognition and earn extra income from advertisement and sponsors.

Qualitative research has documented several instances of discriminatory behavior in esports that have caused women to quit gaming or trying to avoid being subjected to such behavior by hiding their gender from other players (e.g. Taylor, 2012; Cote, 2017; Witkowski, 2018; Ruvalcaba et al. 2018). Such coping mechanisms for dealing with discrimination and harassment contribute to reducing women's visibility and presence in esports, creating a negative circle of self-enforcing stereotypes related to esports as a male domain (Cote, 2017; McLean & Griffiths, 2018).

Exclusion of women in esports may partially be caused by how games are designed. Research has shown that game design is a male-dominated industry (see Fron et al., 2007; Jenson & de Castell, 2015). The studies conduct, among other things, critical analyses of how women are represented as characters in the games, as well as how the low proportion of women who work with game development may have an impact on the number of available female characters included in each game.

Analyzing the proportion of women in 23 different game genres⁵, Yee (2017) found that the sports game genre was the genre with the lowest share of women participation, having only 2 percent women players. A common trait among the game genres in which women had low participation was that there were few available female characters (Yee, 2017). Some women esports players want to have the opportunity to play with female characters (Consalvo & Harper, 2009), but according to Williams et al. (2009) female characters only constituted 10 percent of the available characters players could choose from in the most popular games in 2009. In the years after Williams et al.'s (2009) study, the proportion of available female characters has increased somewhat, but the number of female game characters is still limited, and female game characters are often portrayed in secondary and sexualized roles (Lynch et al., 2016). In a study of sexualization of game characters in video games released between 1983 and 2014, Lynch et al. (2016) found that this type of sexualization is most widespread in so-called fighting games. At the opposite end of the scale were role-playing games (RPGs) among the genres with the lowest degree of sexualization (Lynch et al., 2016). This finding may be seen in relation with previous findings showing that women prefer to play games with a lower degree of sexualization of game characters (Hartmann & Klimmt, 2006), and that women players play RPGs more often than any other

⁵ It is difficult to define exactly how many game genres there are within esports today, as one can divide the most popular main genres into several subgenres. The gaming website Gamedesigning (2020) have defined 34 different game genres, subgenres included.

game genre (Williams et al., 2009). Although one cannot prove a causal link, these findings may indicate that women players are drawn to games that avoid sexualization of female characters to the largest extent.

Even if female characters are rarely sexualized in sports games, Olsen (2013) highlights that one of the reasons for women's low participation in sports games is that there are few opportunities to use female characters in the games. This may also be a part of the reason for Crawford (2005) finding that women prefer sports games related to multi-sports, such as skiing and athletics, sports games that often have a balanced focus on the men's and women's competitions. Women players also preferred games based on individual sports, such as golf and skateboard games, ahead of team-based sports (Crawford, 2005). Consequently, it is perhaps not surprising that few women participate in professional esports competitions in sports games, as the genre is dominated by team-based sports games in which there is often no option to play with a women's team. Examples of such games are the football game FIFA, the basketball game NBA, the ice hockey game NHL, and the American football-based game Madden.

IOC, EQUALITY AND STRATEGIES FOR GENDER BALANCE IN ESPORTS

Equality is one of the IOC's fundamental sports political values and is a criterion for the admission of new sports in the Olympic Games (IOC, n.d.). Esports has been characterized for marginalization and discrimination of women (Darvin et al., 2020; Ruvalcaba et al., 2018; Ask et al., 2016; Paaßen et al., 2017; Cote, 2017; Taylor, 2012).

Protecting athletes from sexism has gained a greater focus in the IOC's sports politics over the last years. This was also a central theme when the IOC in 2018 established its own working group called *Gender Equality Review Project* (GERP), which was tasked with finding ways for the IOC to improve equality on and off the sports field (IOC, 2020a). GERP recommended in its report that IOC's member organizations should commit to defeating harassment and abuse by including this as its own point in the IOC's *Basic Principles of Good Governance* (IOC, 2020b). This is a set of principles that all member organizations in the Olympic movement are committed to through their membership. If the IOC follows this recommendation, it involves that the international federations that will represent esports, are obligated to take substantial measures to improve equality in the competitions. Many people, including former Olympian and assistant professor Nicole W. Forrester (2018), has

questioned whether it is possible for esports to change its gaming culture quickly enough, or if the Olympian sports movement's gender political values must give way if the IOC is to welcome esports into the Olympics.

According to the IOC's plans, the 2024 Summer Olympics and the 2026 Winter Olympics will have full gender equality in athlete quotas in all medal events (IOC, 2020b). Ensuring an adequate participation of women in esports may be challenging in the sports game genre, given that women constitute only 2 percent of sports game players (Yee, 2017). Among more popular game genres, which the IOC plans to exclude from the Olympic Games, women participation is much higher. For instance, the proportion of women players in CS:GO is 24 percent, DOTA 2 20 percent, Hearthstone 26 percent and Overwatch 26 percent (Interpret, 2019). By focusing exclusively on the sports game genre, the IOC may face problems in recruiting enough women players to meet their own goals for equality in the Olympics.

MIXED-GENDER COMPETITION AND DIFFERENT CONDITIONS FOR MEN AND WOMEN ESPORTS PLAYERS

Traditionally, Olympic competitions are divided into men's events and women's events. This divide by gender is a measure to ensure fair competition between athletes, but it is unclear whether this divide by gender is appropriate in esports. Although there are women's tournaments in esports, the largest and most prestigious tournaments are mixed-gender. Some women players have been able to assert themselves in these great tournaments. For instance, Chinese Li Xiaomeng became the first women world champion in the game Hearthstone in 2019 (Miller, 2019). At some point, the IOC will have to consider whether women and men players are to compete in mixed-gender events in the Olympics, or whether they should keep the traditional divide between women and men's events. Two important questions that arise from this are: which competition model protects women e-sport players' opportunities best? And: do mixed-gender or gender divided competition promote equality in esports most effectively?

The IOC has already started considering the possibility of including mixed-gender competitions, for example mixed-gender relays in sports such as athletics and biathlon. In its report, the GERP commission also recommends that the IOC continues these plans as a measure to promote equality in the Olympic Games (IOC, 2020b). These arguments

strengthen the idea that esports competitions in future Olympic Games should be mixed-gender. However, mixed-gender competitions may also have challenges with equality when it comes to ensuring representation of both genders through Olympic qualifiers. Because even if esports competitions often are open to both genders, women constitute a minority in tournaments when 95 percent of professional esports players are men.

With so few professional women players partaking in the largest tournament, a substantial wage gap has emerged between men and women players. While the 100 best men players are expected to earn on average more than 8 million Norwegian kroner in the course of their career (which on average stretches from two to five years), the corresponding amount for the 100 best women players are lower than 100 000 Norwegian kroner (Smith, 2018). In other words, the best men players on average earn 84 times more than the best women players in an industry with a revenue of more than one billion Norwegian kroner annually (Hagar, 2017). On average, the best e-sport players play twelve hours a day, six days a week (Smith, 2018). This means that options are limited when it comes to earning extra income beside the gaming career, making it economically challenging for the best women players to fully pursue a professional esports career.

Many women players are not part of the largest and most economically rewarding tournaments, and rather wish to participate in women's tournaments. The understanding of esports as a meritocratic and individualistic activity where women and men participate on equal footing, may contribute to neglecting the challenges that women players face in mixed-gender tournaments. Taylor (2012, p. 124) formulates it this way: «Anyone can play computer games and anyone can enter tournaments so if women aren't there it's just because they aren't good enough, aren't trying hard enough, right?». This individualistic frame of mind does not consider how gendered power relations impact the professionalization of esports and influence women's room for maneuver and opportunities. Women players not only face challenges related to establishing a professional esports career, they also face this challenge as women in a community in which sexism and harassment of women is not uncommon (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018). Many women players recognize the structural factors holding them back that hinder many from reaching the top level of esports. Consequently, many women players think that it is important to have women's tournaments, which are perceived as safer spaces to develop their gaming skills (Lynch et al., 2016; Taylor, 2012).

During the esports conference in Lausanne in 2018, Amber Dalton, former professional esports player and founder of PMS Clan⁶, argued that an Olympic competition in esports should be mixed-gender (IOC Media, 2018). She substantiated her argument by explaining that there are no physical reasons for dividing such a competition by gender, and that women players are fully capable of beating men contestants, as long as they are given adequate focus and support during their careers from an early stage. Dividing sports competitions by gender has traditionally been justified by biological differences between women and men, and this argument has largely been accepted by women athletes to ensure “fair” competition in elite sports⁷ (Kruthika, 2020). However, biological differences in strength and endurance are not as relevant arguments for dividing competitions by gender in esports (Shen et al., 2016). To ensure that a qualifier to the Olympics will be as fair as possible, Dalton suggested a solution that involved giving a certain number of women players the opportunity to qualify to the Olympics through wins in selected women’s competitions ahead of the Games (IOC Media, 2018). Gender quotas and other women-centered strategies have proven to be an effective gender political tool in sports (Elling et al., 2019). Quotas for women players through tournaments divided by gender may therefore be a fruitful strategy for achieving equality. Still, this strategy may be unsuccessful if women (who have qualified through quotas) finish last in the competitions during the Olympics, aggravating stereotypes of women gamers’ inferiority. For instance, in 2019, the women’s team *Vaevictis Esports* was invited into the exclusive League of Legends league LCL. After several humiliating defeats, it became apparent that the team was nowhere near of competing on the same level as the other contestants, and the team was therefore excluded from the league after just one season (Sacco, 2019). The team’s participation was later criticized for being a reckless publicity stunt on the part of the organizer (Sacco, 2019). The women players were also subjected to extensive criticism and hate speech through derogatory remarks online, especially on the web forum Reddit (Sacco, 2019).

Even if profiled women gamers like Dalton has expressed that women-only tournaments should not be necessary in esports, there are also many women gamers who are grateful for their existence, precisely because of experiences like the one of *Vaevictis Esports* in the LCL league. For some women esports players, women tournaments are a limitation, for others it is a safe space to develop skills without fear of harassment. Given the challenges for

⁶ PMS Clan is one of the oldest and largest esports communities for women with 58 000 members worldwide.

⁷ See also Anna Adlwarths chapter in this book.

equality that harassment of women gamers brings with it, it is possible that dividing esports competitions in the Olympics by gender is a good solution to ensure stable recruitment and promotion of women in a male-dominated sports community.

To put this into a larger context, one can compare equality challenges in esports with the historical events in the USA after the implementation of “Title IX” in 1972⁸ (Darvin et al., 2020). The year before the law was passed, only 1 percent of high schools and universities’ funding of sports went to women sports. Simultaneously, there were 12,5 times as many boys as girls among high school students who participated in sports (Billie Jean King, n.d.). Because of this, a dominant view was that women were not as interested in participating in sports as men (Kihl et al., 2013). With the implementation of Title IX, a set of new activities and educational programs were established to promote women sports. Accordingly, women participation in sports in the USA rose with 1057 percent on high school level and 614 percent on university level in the wake of the implementation of the 1972 law (King, n.d.). According to Darvin and Sagas (2017), the increase in women’s sports participation in the USA after Title IX demonstrates the importance of gender-divided arenas for creating sustainable women participation in male-dominated areas of society.

New game technology and new trends: a step towards greater equality in professional esports?

The example with “Title IX” in the USA may suggest that the explanation that women are not interested in esports because women participation in mixed-gender tournaments is low is too simplistic. The picture is more complex and nuanced than this. Esports is in constant development and has proven to be flexible and adaptable in line with greater social changes. For example, esports had its own #MeToo-movement in the summer of 2020 (Lorenz & Browning, 2020). Over 70 people, mostly women players and streamers, shared stories of sexism, harassment and assault on different social media platforms. The allegations led to a thorough review, and several people considered it start of lasting change in the esports industry (Lorenz & Browning, 2020). Esports’ flexibility and adaptability also entail that the possibility for increasing women participation may be larger than believed at first glance

⁸ Title IX is a federal civil rights law that was passed as part of changes in education in 1972. The law was implemented to prevent sex-based discrimination in public education and federally supported sports programs in high schools, colleges and universities (King, n.d.).

(Yee, 2017). This particularly applies to the potential that new game technology brings for increased equality in esports.

The development of mobile games has, among other things, challenged the male dominance in esports. Mobile gaming is today dominated by women players (66 percent) and has also proven to be an activity that works as gateway into professional esports for women (Interpret, 2019). According to Skillz, a mobile platform that offers a wide range of competitive mobile games, 70 percent of the players who won the most prize money on their platform in 2018 were women (Interpret, 2019). Mobile-based esports competitions are so far a new and relatively marginal phenomenon, but this type of esports has still grown substantially over the last years (Interpret, 2019). Thus, these numbers may indicate that the key to increasing women participation in esports is focusing more on mobile- and tablet-based games ahead of console- and PC-based esports games. In the age group 18–34 years, which is the dominant age group in professional esports, 77 percent of the girls report that they prefer playing on smart phones (ESA, 2020). For comparison, 75 percent of the boys in the same age group prefer playing console games. Because sports games mainly are played on consoles and PC, it is perhaps not surprising that this particular game genre is dominated by men. For the same reason, it is unsurprising that the proportion of women in sports games have not had the same increase as in games that can be played on different gaming platforms. The card game *Hearthstone* is a good example of the latter type.

In the future, increased use of VR- and AR-technology in sports games may contribute to tearing down the platform divides that exist in the gaming world today and open for a greater diversity of players, independent from preferred gaming platform. Maria Stukoff, one of the panelists during the esports conference in Lausanne and director of the technological department at the University of Salford, highlighted the significance of this during the conference (IOC, 2018). She pictures a technological development where one in 10–15 years will be able to connect regular cellphones with VR- and AR-technology, as well as different body sensors able to register and measure movements and the pulse of players, and with this creating a completely new and realistic gaming experience with a high emphasis on physical performance (IOC Media, 2018). This is a development that the IOC has stated that it wants for esports, but it is also a development that may contribute to reduce mixed-gender competitions in esports. A development towards more physically demanding gaming may also weaken esports' potential for including persons with physical disabilities. In other words, it is unclear whether a focus on AR- and VR-technology will promote or hinder equality in esports

in the future. This likely depends on how technologies are developed and implemented in the different game genres.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

The IOC has stated that it wishes to include esports in the Olympic Games in the future. A justification for this is that esports has a unique potential with respect to equality by becoming an Olympic discipline where men and women athletes compete on equal terms in the same competition. However, as we have illustrated in this chapter, it is not given that mixed-gender competition is the most fruitful strategy for achieving better equality in esports. The inclusion of esports in the Olympics will entail several gender political dilemmas. Our ambition in this chapter has been to shine a light on some of these dilemmas, in relation to (1) the lack of available female characters in sports games, (2) gender inequality in economic conditions in professional esports, (3) discrimination and sexual harassment of women esports players and (4) gendered preferences in the choice of gaming platforming.

The establishment of esports as an Olympic discipline, marked by equal conditions and opportunities for men and women players, still has a long way to go. If esports is to become a part of the Olympic sports movement, the challenges of harassment of women must be addressed. Women players are far more likely to experience discrimination in the form of negative feedback and sexual harassment than men in the esports world (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018; Ask et al., 2016; Taylor, 2012; Jenson & de Castell, 2018; Cote, 2017; Ratan et al., 2015). The IOC has acknowledged these challenges at the esports conference in Lausanne (2018) and the organization's eight summit (2019). Given the IOC's ambition of achieving full equality in all medal events in future Olympic Games, esports may end up at a crossroads. Actors involved with esports need to decide whether esports should continue being a competitive entertainment industry where women players risk staying targets for discrimination and harassment, or if one should try to make a greater effort to defeat the problems related to gender discrimination. The latter will likely be a necessary measure to legitimate itself as an Olympic sport.

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ARTICLE II (Norwegian version)

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KAPITTEL 11

HVEM INKLUDERES? ET KJØNNSPERSPEKTIV PÅ IOCS STRATEGI FOR E-SPORT I OL

Egil Rogstad, Bjørnar Blaalid og Anne Tjønndal

I 2018 arrangerte Den internasjonale olympiske komité (IOC) en konferanse om e-sport i sitt hovedkvarter i Lausanne¹. Representanter fra hele det internasjonale e-sportmiljøet ble invitert i tillegg til nasjonale olympiske komiteer, idrettsforbund, utøvere og media (IOC, 2018). Under konferansen uttalte IOC-president Thomas Bach at IOC ønsker å inkludere e-sport i De olympiske leker (OL) (IOC, 2018). I september samme år gjorde Bach det uttrykkelig klart at det ikke var aktuelt å inkludere e-sportspill som fremmer vold i OL (Wade, 2018). Såkalte «drepe-spill», som Bach kalte det, strider (ifølge IOC-presidenten) mot de olympiske verdiene (IOC, 2019).

I desember 2019 samlet IOCs styre seg i Lausanne for organisasjonens åttende toppmøte, og e-sport ble igjen et tema på agendaen. Toppmøtet mente å ha funnet en strategi for hvordan e-sport kan inkluderes i OL uten å gå på akkord med de olympiske verdiene. Løsningen går ut på at IOC kun vil vurdere å inkludere sportsspill (spill som simulerer idrett) og dermed utelate majoriteten av e-sportspill, som faller inn under andre spillsjangere (IOC, 2019). På toppmøtet fremhevet IOC at mange spill i sportssjangeren er i ferd med å bli mer fysisk krevende gjennom innovativ ny spillteknologi.²

E-sportens lave fysiske aktivitetsnivå er et aspekt som ofte har blitt kritisert i diskusjoner om hvorvidt e-sport bør inkluderes i idrettsorganisasjoner eller ikke (Parry, 2019; Tjønndal & Skauge, 2021). Ved hjelp av virtual reality (VR) og augmented reality (AR) teknologi, som er teknologier som går ut på å erstatte syns- og hørselsinntrykk med digitale, virtuelle inntrykk, utvikles det nå spill

1 Global Association of International Sports Federations (GAISF) var medarrangør.

2 Dette utdypes på side ##12 Det opprinnelige sidetallet viser til avsnittet "Ny spillteknologi og nye trender". **Må oppdateres med endelig sidetall i trykt bok.##.**

som krever at spillerne må gjøre fysiske bevegelser for å spille (Tjønndal, 2020). Dette ble fremhevet som en viktig faktor for IOCs strategi om å satse på en integrering av sportsspill i OL (IOC, 2019). I etterkant av konferansen om e-sport og toppmøtet i Lausanne fulgte en rykteffom i internasjonale medier om at e-sport kom til å bli inkludert i OL allerede i Paris 2024. IOC avkreftet ryktet: e-sport ville ikke bli en del av det offisielle OL-programmet i Paris. Den lokale arrangementskomiteen for Paris 2024 har derimot uttalt at de vil organisere e-sport-konkurranser og turneringer under OL, som et tilskudd til de olympiske idrettskonkurransene (Paris2024, 2019).

Et unikt aspekt ved e-sport som en potensiell ny olympisk gren er at mannlige og kvinnelige utøvere i e-sport kan konkurrere mot hverandre på like vilkår. Dette likestillingspotensialet ble også understreket under e-sportkonferansen i Lausanne (IOC, 2018). På denne konferansen ble det også fremhevet at det fysiske aspektet i utøvelsen av e-sport er lite, sammenlignet med andre olympiske idretter. Det er ikke avgjørende for prestasjonen i sportsspill om en spiller er høy eller lav, fysisk sterk eller svak, har god eller dårlig utholdenhet. Det er heller ikke påvist noen fysiologiske eller biologiske grunner til at kvinner ikke skal kunne prestere på samme nivå som menn i e-sport (Shen et al., 2016). Dette innebærer at e-sport kan bli den første OL-grenen der mannlige og kvinnelige utøvere kan konkurrere på like vilkår i en og samme konkurranse, for de samme medaljene. Samtidig er det et paradoks at IOC ønsker en spillteknologisk utvikling som vil gjøre sportsspillene mer fysisk krevende, parallelt med at man fremhever likestillingspotensialet som ligger i e-sportens små krav til styrke og utholdenhet. Utviklingen mot e-sport som en ny OL-gren åpner også for nye idrettspolitiske dilemmaer og likestillingsspørsmål. Med denne bakgrunnen belyser vi følgende problemstilling i dette kapitlet: *Hvilke kjønnspolitiske dilemmaer og likestillingsutfordringer medfører IOCs strategi for inkludering av e-sport (sportsspill) i OL?*

Vi belyser dette spørsmålet gjennom å utforske IOCs gjeldende strategi for e-sport i OL. Dette innebærer en eksplorativ analytisk tilnærming til den offentlige informasjonen som er publisert om IOCs planer for e-sport. Vår fortolkning av IOCs e-sportstrategi baserer seg på to hovedkilder: 1) videoopptaket av e-sportforumet i 2018 (IOC, 2018) og 2) pressemeldingen etter IOCs åttende toppmøte i 2019 (IOC, 2019). For å utforske hvilke kjønnspolitiske dilemmaer den potensielle inkluderingen av e-sport i OL kan medføre, tar vi utgangspunkt i tidligere forskning på kvinnelige e-sportspilleres vilkår, samt IOCs overordnede idrettspolitiske likestillingsmål og verdigrunnlag. Vi drøfter hvilke dilemmaer og mulighetsrom som kan oppstå, knyttet til likestilling og kjønnsbalanse i e-sport, i lys av IOCs strategi for e-sport i OL. I det videre

redegjør vi for e-sportens historiske utviklingslinjer, før vi presenterer tidligere forskning på kjønnsbalanse og likestilling i e-sport.

E-SPORT: DEFINISJONER OG HISTORISKE UTVIKLINGSLINJER

E-sport defineres på mange ulike måter. For eksempel definerer Jonasson og Thiborg (2010) e-sport som «profesjonelle konkurranser i video- og dataspill» (s. 288). En oppdatert og mer nyansert definisjon er utviklet av Hamari & Sjöblom (2017), som beskriver e-sport som «a form of sports where the primary aspects of the sport are facilitated by electronic systems; the input of players and teams as well as the output of the eSports system are mediated by human-computer interfaces» (s. 211). Ifølge Hamari & Sjöblom (2017) er altså e-sport en samlebetegnelse for idretter som utøves gjennom bruken av elektroniske systemer.

Det er vanlig å kategorisere e-sport etter spillsjanger. Noen eksempler på populære spillsjangere er: (1) multiplayer online battle arenas (MOBA), (2) skyte-, kamp- og krigsspill, (3) strategispill, (4) kortspill og (5) sportsspill (SVGs³). Sportsspill, sjangeren som IOC ønsker å inkludere i OL, betegner alle spill som simulerer idrett. Sportsspill kan ha fokus på enkeltutøvere eller lag, som for eksempel i fotballspillet «FIFA», eller det kan være spill som har fokus på laglederen, eksempelvis i spill som «Football Manager». Til tross for at de største sportsspillseriene som FIFA (fotball), NBA 2K (basketball), Madden NFL (amerikansk fotball) lenge har vært blant de bestselgende spillene på verdensbasis, regnes sportsspill som en av de minst populære i spillsjangerne i e-sportens verden (Mirabito & Kucek, 2019).

E-sportens opprinnelse kan spores tilbake til amerikanske arkadespill på 1970-tallet (Billings & Hou, 2019; Zhouxiang, 2016). Fremveksten av e-sport startet trolig i Japan og USA, landene hvor det først ble det arrangert konkurranser i flerspillermodus (multiplayer) på arkademaskiner i spillehaller og konsollspill. Den gang var målet med konkurransene å forbedre og slå hverandres rekorder. Med introduksjonen av internett i 1989 og den teknologiske utviklingen av hjemme-PC-er som kom på begynnelsen av 1990-tallet, ekspanderte konkurransene til å foregå over internett (online) eller gjennom såkalte Local Area Networks (LAN). E-sportmiljøer vokste frem i takt med den teknologiske utviklingen, spesielt i østasiatiske land og i hovedsak i Sør-Korea. Den raske utviklingen i Sør-Korea har blant annet bakgrunn i en generelt sterk interesse for videospill, samt økonomiske og politiske forhold (Billings & Hou, 2019). Sørkoreanske myndigheter oppfordret til utvikling

3 SVGs er en forkortelse for sports video games.

av informasjonsteknologi på et tidlig tidspunkt, noe som ga de fleste sørkoreanske hjem tidlig tilgang til bredbånd av høy kvalitet (Jin & Chee, 2009). Myndighetene satset parallelt på utvikling av landets spillindustri grunnet et behov for en ny sørkoreansk underholdningsindustri i kjølvannet av den asiatiske finanskrisen i 1997 (Mozur, 2014).

På et par tiår har e-sport utviklet seg til en kommersiell underholdningsindustri med profesjonelle turneringer som følges av millioner av mennesker verden over. I 2019 var det for eksempel over 100 millioner seere som logget seg inn for å overvære VM-finalen i MOBA-spillet *League of Legends* (Steinkuehler 2020). Profesjonelle arrangørorganisasjoner som World Cyber Games (WCG), Electronic Sport World Cup (ESWC) og Cyberathlete Professional League (CPL), sammen med internasjonale aktører og sponsorer, har bidratt til å løfte e-sport opp på en internasjonal scene (Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010; Karhulahti, 2017). I takt med økt popularitet har pengepremiene utøverne kan innkassere, også økt betraktelig (Funk et al., 2018). I 2008 var det eksempelvis mulig å vinne 200 000 kroner i en enkelt turnering, mens i dag kan beløpene det kjempes om være på flere millioner kroner (Esports Earnings, 2020). Premiepotten i verdensmesterskapet for det populære MOBA-spillet *Dota 2* var i 2020 eksempelvis på over 300 millioner norske kroner (Esports Earnings, 2020).

KJØNN, E-SPORT OG SPORTSSPILL

Dennis Hemphill ved Victoria University, Australia, (1995) var en av de første til å påpeke at den digitale utøvelsen av e-sport gir muligheter for likestilling mellom kjønn, og mellom funksjonsfriske utøvere og parautøvere på helt andre måter enn hva tradisjonell idrett klarer. I 1995 beskrev Hemphill dette potensialet slik: «Cyberspace holds out the possibility that new forms of sport participation and sociality can be created in terms of game-making, game-playing, and norm-making within the game» (Hemphill, 1995, s. 58). E-sport har imidlertid ennå ikke klart å utnytte dette potensialet. Det er lite forskning på parautøveres deltakelse og vilkår i e-sport, og 23 år etter Hemphills (1995) bidrag har en annen australsk forsker, Emma Witkowski (2018), oppsummert vilkårene for kvinnelige e-sportspillere slik:

For women engaging in such expert gaming endeavours, their gender performances (while varied), are made alongside productions of hegemonic sporting masculinity as a gender performance that is locally dominant, associated to traditional sports, and aligned to male body skill superiority, antagonistic competitiveness, and heterosexual virility (Witkowski, 2018, s. 188).

Til tross for likestillingsutfordringene Witkowski (2018) påpeker, så er det mange kvinner som spiller på hobbybasis. The Entertainment Software Association (ESA) anslår at 41 prosent av alle som spiller videospill er kvinner (ESA, 2020). I tillegg viser ESAs rapport at over 75 prosent av de som spiller er eldre enn 18 år. Unge tenåringsgutter blir likevel ofte portrettert som den «gjennomsnittlige gameren», samtidig som det har oppstått generelle forestillinger om at jenter ikke liker å spille (Ratan et al., 2015). Kjønnfordelingen blant profesjonelle e-sportspillere er likevel skjevare enn i spilling generelt. Blant profesjonelle e-sportspillere er det anslått en kvinneandel på fem prosent (Hilbert, 2019). Hva er så årsaken til at så mange kvinner spiller, mens så få kvinner driver med profesjonell e-sport? Er profesjonell e-sport en «moderne gutteklubb» som marginaliserer kvinners deltakelse? Er spillkonkurransene utformet slik at de ikke er attraktive for kvinnelige spillere? Det er fortsatt lite forskningsbasert kunnskap på dette feltet, men det finnes noen internasjonale studier som belyser disse spørsmålene.

Hva skyldes den skjeve kjønnfordelingen i e-sport og sportspill?

Den lave kvinneandelen blant e-sportspillere har ført til spekulasjoner om at dette skyldes at kvinner og menn har ulike preferanser når det gjelder spillsjanger, der kvinner foretrekker sosiale spill med et lavt konkurranseaspekt, mens menn foretrekker spill hvor det kåres en vinner og en taper (Taylor, 2012; Shen et al., 2016). Med utgangspunkt i norsk forskning på gutters og jenters motiver for trening og idrettsdeltakelse, kan det tenkes at det er noe sannhet i denne antakelsen. Studier av ungdomsidrett og frafall viser at gutter i større grad motiveres av det å konkurrere og måle krefter med andre enn hva jenter gjør, mens det sosiale fellesskapet er viktigere for jenter enn for gutter (Seippel, 2016; Skauge & Rafoss, 2020).

Fordi det er få kvinner på toppen av pallen i internasjonale e-sportkonkurranser, har det oppstått kjønnete forestillinger om at kvinner ikke er i stand til å prestere på samme nivå som menn i e-sport. Dette er stereotypier som i mange tilfeller har dannet seg på bakgrunn av utdaterte forestillinger om at biologiske kjønnsforskjeller gir ulike forutsetninger for menns og kvinners prestasjoner i e-sport. Ifølge Taylor (2012) bunner dette i vage og stereotypiske antakelser om at det er forskjell på kvinners og menns kognisjonsferdigheter. Taylor (2012) eksemplifiserer dette med antakelsen om at menn er bedre i skytespill enn kvinner fordi menn i oldtiden var jegere mens kvinner var samlere (Taylor, 2012). Denne typen essensialistiske forklaringer bygger på ideen om at biologi gjør kvinner svakere i idrettskontekster (Hovden, 2005). Forklaringene om kjønnete spillinteresser og biologiske kjønnsforskjeller på kvinners underrepresentasjon

i e-sport har imidlertid blitt avkrefret av forskning. Nyere forskning viser at den skjeve kjønnsbalansen i e-sport trolig skyldes andre faktorer, deriblant: (1) ulik mengde spillerfaring (Shen et al., 2016), (2) kulturelle og kjønnede forventninger til spilling som fritidsaktivitet (Darvin et al., 2020) og (3) trakassering, diskriminering og andre omstendigheter som forhindrer kvinner fra å bli like engasjerte i e-sport som menn (Jenson & de Castell, 2018).

Den lave andelen kvinner i e-sportmiljøer kan ha sammenheng med at de fleste e-sportorganisasjonene er skapt av og for menn. Paaßen et al. (2017) argumenterer for at dette resulterer i et miljø som reproducerer maskulin dominans. Feministisk idrettsforskning har vist at idretter som domineres av menn, ofte kan føre til et sosialt miljø som marginaliserer kvinners deltakelse og handlingsrom (Hovden, 2012; Tjønndal & Hovden, 2020; Channon & Phipp, 2017). Innenfor e-sport er kvinner en minoritet, noe som gjør dem utsatt for trakasserende atferd fra motspillere og publikum. Dette medfører at kvinnelige spillere møter andre forventninger og får andre typer tilbakemeldinger fra motspillere og tilskuere sammenlignet med mannlige spillere (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018).

Negative kommentarer knyttet til kvinners kropp og trusler om seksuell vold er noe kvinnelige e-sportspillere ofte opplever å få rettet mot seg, mens mannlige e-sportspillere i liten grad opplever dette (Ask, Svendsen og Karlstrøm 2016). I en undersøkelse viste for eksempel Ruvalcaba et al. (2018) at det er ti ganger mer sannsynlig at kvinnelige streamere⁴ mottar seksuelle kommentarer sammenlignet med menn. Seksualisering og objektivisering av den kvinnelige idrettsutøverkroppen er hverken et nytt fenomen eller et problem forbeholdt e-sporten. I sitt akademiske arbeid har Jorid Hovden fremhevet hvordan kvinner i idrett utsettes for doble kjønnskoder (Hovden & von der Lippe, 2017; Hovden, 2010). Med dette mener Hovden (2010) at kvinnelige idrettsutøvere forventes å prestere på mannskroppens premisser, samtidig som kvinnekroppen skal være attraktiv for et mannlige heteroseksuelt blikk. Studien til Ruvalcaba og kolleger (2018) kan tyde på at idrettens doble kjønnskoder også utgjør en likestillingsutfordring for e-sport.

Kvalitativ forskning har gitt flere eksempler på at opplevelser av diskriminerende atferd i e-sport har ført til at kvinnelige spillere har sluttet å spille eller prøvd å unngå å få slik atferd rettet mot seg gjennom å skjule sitt kjønn

⁴ En streamer er en person som kringkaster seg selv gjennom å dele video, bilde og/eller lyd av seg selv. Streaming har blitt en populær aktivitet blant gamere for å knytte kontakt med publikum, gjøre seg selv kjent og skaffe ekstra inntekter gjennom reklame- og sponsorinntekter.

for motspillere (e.g. Taylor, 2012; Cote, 2017; Witkowski, 2018; Ruvalcaba et al. 2018). Slike måter å håndtere diskriminering og trakassering på bidrar til å svekke kvinners synlighet og tilstedeværelse i e-sport, noe som skaper en negativ sirkel av selvforsterkende stereotypier knyttet til e-sport som et mannsdomene (Cote, 2017; McLean & Griffiths, 2018).

En del av forklaringen på ekskluderingen av kvinner i e-sport kan ligge i måten spillene blir utformet på. Forskning har vist hvordan spilldesign er en mannsdominert industri (Se Fron et al., 2007; Jenson & de Castell, 2015). Studiene ser blant annet kritisk på hvordan kvinner fremstilles som karakterer i spillene, samt hvordan den lave andelen kvinner som jobber innenfor spillutvikling kan ha betydning for hvor mange spillbare kvinnelige karakterer som inkluderes i hvert spill.

I en analyse av kvinneandelen i 23 forskjellige spillsjangere⁵ kom Yee (2017) frem til at sportsspillsjangeren var den sjangeren med lavest kvinnetakelse, med bare 2 prosent kvinnelige spillere. Et av fellestrekkene blant spillsjangerne som hadde lavest kvinnetakelse, var at disse spillene hadde få spillbare kvinnelige karakterer (Yee, 2017). Noen kvinnelige e-sportspillere ønsker å ha mulighet til å spille med kvinnelige karakterer (Consalvo & Harper, 2009), men ifølge Williams et al. (2009) utgjorde kvinnelige karakterer bare 10 prosent av tilgjengelige spillkarakterer som spillere kunne velge mellom i de mest populære spillene i 2009. I årene etter Williams et al.s (2009) undersøkelse har andelen tilgjengelige kvinnelige karakterer økt noe, men antallet kvinnelige spillkarakterer er fortsatt begrenset, og kvinnelige spillkarakterer blir ofte portrettert i sekundære og seksualiserte roller (Lynch et al., 2016). I en undersøkelse av seksualisering av spillkarakterer i videospill utgitt mellom 1983 og 2014 fant Lynch et al. (2016) ut at denne typen seksualisering er mest utbredt i såkalte «slåssespill» (fighting games). I motsatt ende var rollespillbaserte spill (RPGs) blant sjangerne med lavest grad av seksualisering (Lynch et al., 2016). Dette funnet kan sees i sammenheng med tidligere funn om at kvinner foretrekker å spille spill med lavere grad av seksualisering av spillkarakterer (Hartmann & Klimmt, 2006), og at kvinnelige spillere spiller RPG-spill oftere enn noen annen spillsjanger (Williams et al., 2009). Uten at man kan fastslå en kausal sammenheng, kan disse funnene indikere at kvinnelige spillere ledes til spill som i størst grad unngår å seksualisere kvinnelige karakterer.

5 Det er vanskelig å definere nøyaktig hvor mange spillsjangere som finnes i e-sport i dag, ettersom man kan dele de mest brukte hovedsjangerne opp i flere undersjangere. Spillnettstedet Gamedesigning (2020) har definert 34 forskjellige spillsjangere, inkludert undersjangere.

Selv om kvinnelige karakterer i liten grad seksualiseres i sportsspill, fremhever Olsen (2013) at en av grunnene til kvinners lave deltakelse i sportsspill er få muligheter til å spille med kvinnelige karakterer. Dette kan også være noe av grunnen til at Crawford (2005) fant at kvinner foretrekker sportsspill knyttet til fleridretter, som for eksempel ski og friidrett, sportsspill som ofte har et balansert fokus på herre- og kvinneklassene. Spill basert på individuelle idretter, som golf- og skateboard-spill, ble også foretrukket fremfor lagidretts-spill av kvinnelige spillere (Crawford, 2005). Med dette utgangspunktet er det kanskje ikke overraskende at få kvinner deltar i profesjonelle e-sportkonkurranser i sportsspill, ettersom sjangeren domineres av lagidretts-spill hvor det ofte ikke er mulig å velge å spille som kvinnelag, som fotballspillet FIFA, basketballspillet NBA, ishockeyspillet NHL eller det amerikansk fotball-baserte spillet Madden.

IOC, LIKESTILLING OG STRATEGIER FOR KJØNNBALANSE I E-SPORT

Likestilling er en av IOCs grunnleggende idrettspolitiske verdier og et kriterium for opptak av nye idretter i OL (IOC, u.å.). E-sport har blitt kritisert for marginalisering og diskriminering av kvinner (Darvin et al., 2020; Ruvalcaba et al., 2018; Ask et al., 2016; Paaßen et al., 2017; Cote, 2017; Taylor, 2012).

Å beskytte idrettsutøvere mot kjønnsdiskriminering har fått større fokus i IOCs idrettspolitikk de siste årene. Dette var også et sentralt tema da IOC i 2018 opprettet et eget arbeidsutvalg, kalt *Gender Equality Review Project* (GERP), som fikk i oppgave å finne måter IOC kunne bedre likestillingen på og utenfor idrettsbanen på (IOC, 2020a). GERP anbefalte i sin rapport at medlemsorganisasjonene i IOC bør forplikte seg til å bekjempe trakassering og overgrep gjennom at dette blir inkludert som et eget punkt i *IOCs Basic Principles of Good Governance* (IOC, 2020b). Dette er et sett av prinsipper som alle medlemsorganisasjoner i den olympiske bevegelsen forplikter seg til å følge gjennom sitt medlemskap. Dersom IOC følger denne anbefalingen, vil det innebære at de internasjonale forbundene som skal representere e-sport, er nødt til å ta omfattende grep for å bedre likestillingen i konkurransene. Mange, deriblandt tidligere olympier og førsteamanuensis Nicole W. Forrester (2018), har stilt spørsmål om hvorvidt det er mulig for e-sporten å endre spillkulturene raskt nok, eller om den olympiske idrettsbevegelsens kjønnspolitiske verdier må vike dersom IOC skal ønske e-sporten velkommen inn i OL.

Ifølge IOCs planer skal det være full kjønnslikestilling for utøverkvoter i alle medaljeøvelser fra sommer-OL 2024 og vinter-OL 2026 (IOC, 2020b). Å sikre en god nok kvinnetilbud innenfor e-sport med utgangspunkt i sportsspillsjangeren kan imidlertid bli utfordrende, ettersom sportsspill har en

kvinnedeltakelse på bare 2 prosent (Yee, 2017). Blant mer populære spillsjangere som IOC planlegger å utelukke fra OL, er kvinnedeltakelsen langt høyere. For eksempel er kvinnedeltakelsen i CS:GO 24 prosent, DOTA 2 20 prosent, Hearthstone 26 prosent og Overwatch 26 prosent (Interpret, 2019). Ved å fokusere utelukkende på sportsspillsjangeren kan IOC få problemer med å rekruttere nok kvinnelige spillere til å oppfylle egne likestillingsmålsettinger i OL.

Kjønnsblandet konkurranse og ulike vilkår for mannlige og kvinnelige e-sportspillere

Tradisjonelt deles OL-konkurranser i herreklasser og dameklasser. Kjønnsinndelingen regnes som et grep for å sikre rettferdig konkurranse mellom utøvere, men det er uklart om en slik kjønnsinndeling er hensiktsmessig i e-sport. Selv om det finnes egne kvinneturneringer i e-sport, så er de største og mest prestisjetunge turneringene kjønnsblandet. Noen kvinnelige spillere har klart å hevde seg i disse store internasjonale turneringene. Eksempelvis ble kinse-siske Li Xiaomeng den første kvinnelige verdensmesteren i spillet Hearthstone i 2019 (Miller, 2019). På sikt blir IOC nødt til å ta stilling til om kvinnelige og mannlige spillere skal konkurrere i en felles kjønnsblandet klasse i OL, eller om de skal følge den tradisjonelle konkurranseorganiseringen med dameklasse og herreklasse. To viktige spørsmål i denne sammenheng er: hvilken konkurranseinnndeling ivaretar kvinnelige e-sportspilleres handlingsrom og muligheter best? Og: fremmer kjønnsblandet eller kjønnsdelt konkurranseorganisering likestilling i e-sport mest effektivt?

IOC har allerede begynt å se på mulighetene for å inkludere konkurranser der menn og kvinner deltar sammen, for eksempel med mixed-stafetter i idretter som friidrett og skiskyting. I sin rapport anbefaler også GERP-utvalget at IOC bør videreutvikle disse planene som et grep for å fremme likestilling i OL ytterligere (IOC, 2020b). Disse argumentene taler for en kjønnsblandet e-sportkonkurranse i fremtidige OL. Kjønnsblandet konkurranse kan likevel skape likestillingsutfordringer når det gjelder å sikre representasjon av begge kjønn gjennom kvalifiseringene til OL. For selv om e-sportkonkurranser ofte er åpne for begge kjønn, er kvinner en minoritet i turneringer når 95 prosent av profesjonelle e-sportutøvere er menn.

Med få profesjonelle kvinnelige spillere i de største turneringene har det oppstått et stort lønnsgap mellom mannlige og kvinnelige spillere. Mens de 100 beste mannlige spillerne er forventet å tjene i snitt over 8 millioner norske kroner i løpet av karrierene sine (som i gjennomsnitt strekker seg over to til fem år), begrenser det samme forventede beløpet for de 100 beste kvinnelige spillerne seg til i underkant av 100 000 norske kroner (Smith, 2018).

Dette vil altså si de beste mannlige spillerne i snitt tjener 84 ganger mer enn de beste kvinnelige spillerne i en industri som omsetter for over en milliard norske kroner årlig (Hagar, 2017). De beste e-sportspillerne spiller i snitt tolv timer om dagen seks dager i uka (Smith, 2018). Det er altså lite rom for å skaffe seg ekstra inntekt på siden av spillerkarrieren, noe som gjør det økonomisk utfordrende for de beste kvinnelige spillere å satse fullt og helt på en profesjonell e-sportkarriere.

Mange kvinnelige spillere uteblir fra de største og mest økonomisk innbringende turneringene, og ønsker heller å delta i kvinneturneringer. Oppfattelsen av e-sport som en meritokratisk og individualistisk aktivitet hvor kvinner og menn stiller likt, kan bidra til at utfordringene kvinnelige spillere står overfor i kjønnsblandede turneringer blir oversett. Taylor (2012, s. 124) formulerer det slik: «Anyone can play computer games and anyone can enter tournaments so if women aren't there it's just because they aren't good enough, aren't trying hard enough, right?» Denne individualistiske tankegangen overser hvordan kjønne maktforhold preger profesjonaliseringen av e-sport og former kvinners handlingsrom og muligheter. Kvinnelige spillere møter ikke bare utfordringen med å skape en profesjonell e-sportkarriere, de er også nødt til å møte denne utfordringen som kvinner i et miljø der kjønnsdiskriminering og trakkasering av kvinner ikke er uvanlig (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018). Mange kvinnelige spillere erkjenner de strukturelle faktorene som holder dem tilbake og hindrer mange fra å nå det høyeste nivået av e-sport. Derfor mener mange kvinnelige spillere at det er viktig å ha egne kvinneturneringer som oppleves som et tryggere sted å utvikle sine spillferdigheter (Lynch et al., 2016; Taylor, 2012).

Under e-sportkonferansen i Lausanne i 2018 argumenterte Amber Dalton, tidligere profesjonell e-sportspiller og grunnlegger av PMS Clan⁶, for at en OL-konkurranse i e-sport bør være kjønnsblandet (IOC Media, 2018). Dette begrunnet hun med at det ikke er noen fysiske argumenter for kjønnsdelt konkurranse, og at kvinnelige spillere er fullt i stand til å slå sine mannlige konkurrenter, så lenge de blir godt nok satset på, ivaretatt og støttet underveis i karrierene sine fra et tidlig stadium. Kjønnsinndeling i idrettskonkurranser har tradisjonelt blitt begrunnet med biologiske forskjeller mellom kvinner og menn, og denne begrunnelsen har stort sett blitt akseptert av kvinnelige utøvere for å muliggjøre «rettferdig» konkurranse i toppidrett⁷ (Kruthika, 2020). Men i e-sport er ikke biologiske forskjeller i styrke og utholdenhet et like holdbart

6 PMS Clan er et av de eldste og største e-sportsamfunnene for kvinner med 58 000 medlemmer på verdensbasis.

7 Se også Anna Adlwarths kapittel i denne boken.

argument for kjønnsdelt konkurranse (Shen et al., 2016). For å sikre en mest mulig rettferdig kvalifisering til OL, foreslo Dalton en løsning der et visst antall kvinnelige spillere kan kvalifisere seg til OL-deltakelse gjennom seiere i utvalgte kvinnekonsurranser i forkant av mesterskapet (IOC Media, 2018). Kjønnkvotering og andre kvinnesentrerte strategier har vist seg å være et effektivt kjønnspolitisk virkemiddel i idrett (Elling et al., 2019). Kvotering av kvinnelige spillere gjennom kjønnsdelte kvalifiseringsrunder kan derfor tenkes å være en fruktbar likestillingsstrategi. Dette kan likevel slå feil ut dersom (kvoterte) kvinnelige spillere ender opp nederst på alle resultatlistene under OL, slik at stereotypier om kvinnelige spilleres underordning forsterkes. I 2019 ble eksempelvis kvinnelaget *Vaevictis Esports* invitert inn i den lukkede League of Legends-ligaen LCL. Etter flere ydmykende tap viste det seg imidlertid at laget ikke var i nærheten av å holde samme nivå som konkurrentene, og dermed ble laget ekskludert fra ligaen etter bare en sesong (Sacco, 2019). I ettertid ble lagets deltakelse kritisert for å være et uforsvarlig oppmerksomhetsstunt fra arrangørens side (Sacco, 2019). De kvinnelige spillerne ble også utsatt for omfattende kritikk og hets gjennom nedsettende nettkommentarer, spesielt på nettforumet Reddit (Sacco, 2019).

Selv om profilerte kvinnelige spillere som Dalton har gitt uttrykk for at egne kvinneklasser i e-sport ikke burde være nødvendig, er det også mange kvinnelige spillere som er takknemmelig for at de finnes, nettopp på grunn av hendelser som *Vaevictis Esports* i LCL-ligaen. For noen kvinnelige e-sportspillere er kvinneturneringer en hemske, for andre er de et trygt sted å utvikle ferdigheter uten frykt for trakassering. Med likestillingsutfordringene med trakassering av kvinnelige spillere som utgangspunkt, kan det tenkes at en egen kvinneklasse i OL er en god løsning for å sikre en stabil rekruttering og promotering av kvinner i et mannsdominert idrettsmiljø.

For å sette dette i et større perspektiv kan man sammenligne likestillingsstrategier i e-sport med de historiske hendelsene i USA etter innføringen av lovendringen «Title IX» i 1972⁸ (Darvin et al., 2020). I året før lovendringen gikk kun 1 prosent av videregående skolars og universiteters idrettsbudsjetter til kvinneidrett. Samtidig var det 12,5 ganger flere gutter enn jenter som drev med idrett blant videregåendelevne (Billie Jean King, u.å.). På grunn av dette rådet en oppfatning om at kvinner ikke var like interessert i å delta i idrett som

8 Title IX er en føderal borgerrettighetslov som ble vedtatt i USA som del av utdanningsendringene i 1972. Loven ble innført for å forhindre kjønnsdiskriminering innen offentlig utdanning og føderalt støttede idrettsprogrammer ved videregående skoler, høyskoler og universiteter (King, u.å.).

menn (Kihl et al., 2013). Med innføringen av Title IX ble det opprettet en rekke nye aktivitets- og utdanningstilbud rettet mot kvinneidrett. Dette førte til at kvinneidrettsdeltakelsen i idrett i USA økte med 1057 prosent på videregående nivå og 614 prosent på universitetsnivå i etterkant av lovendringen i 1972 (King, u.å.). Ifølge Darvin og Sagas (2017) demonstrerer økningen i kvinners idrettsdeltakelse i USA etter Title IX hvor viktig det er med kjønndelte arenaer for å skape bærekraftig kvinneidrettsdeltakelse på mannsdominerte samfunnsområder.

Ny spillteknologi og nye trender: et steg mot større likestilling i profesjonell e-sport?

Eksemplet med «Title IX» i USA kan vitne om at forklaringen om at kvinner ikke er interessert i e-sport fordi kvinneidrettsdeltakelsen i kjønnsbladede turneringer er lav, blir for enkel. Bildet er mer komplekst og nyansert enn dette. E-sporten er i konstant utvikling og har vist seg å være fleksibel og tilpassingsdyktig i takt med større samfunnsendringer. Dette vises for eksempel gjennom måten e-sporten hadde sitt eget #MeToo-oppgjør sommeren 2020 (Lorenz & Browning, 2020). Over 70 personer, de fleste kvinnelige spillere og streamere, sto frem i ulike sosiale medier med historier om kjønnsdiskriminering, trakassering og overgrep. Anklagene førte til en grundig gjennomgang, og ble av flere ansett som starten på varige endringer i e-sportindustrien (Lorenz & Browning, 2020). E-sportens evne til fleksibilitet og tilpasning betyr også at handlingsrommet for å øke kvinners deltakelse kan være større enn det kanskje virker som ved første øyekast (Yee, 2017). Dette gjelder særlig det potensialet ny spillteknologi har for økt likestilling i e-sport.

De siste årenes utvikling av mobilspill har blant annet utfordret mannsdominansen i e-sport. Mobilspilling er i dag dominert av kvinnelige spillere (66 prosent) og har også vist seg å være en aktivitet som kan fungere som en inngang til profesjonell e-sport for kvinner (Interpret, 2019). Ifølge Skillz, en mobilplattform som tilbyr et vidt spenn av konkurransebaserte mobilspill, var 70 prosent av spillerne som vant mest premiepenger på plattformen deres i 2018 kvinner (Interpret, 2019). Mobilbaserte e-sportkonkurranser er foreløpig en fersk og lite utbredt gren, men denne typen e-sport har likevel vært i sterk vekst de siste årene (Interpret, 2019). Derfor kan også disse tallene være en indikasjon på at nøkkelen til å øke kvinneidrettsdeltakelsen i e-sport kan ligge i å fokusere mer på mobil- og nettbrettbaserte spill fremfor konsoll- og PC-baserte e-sportspill. I aldersspennet 18–34 år, som er alderen flest profesjonelle e-sportspillere befinner seg i, oppgir 77 prosent av jentene at de foretrekker å spille på smarttelefon (ESA, 2020). Til sammenligning foretrekker 75 prosent av guttene i samme alder å spille på konsoll. Ettersom sportspill i stor grad spilles på konsoller og PC, er det

kanskje ikke overraskende at akkurat denne spillsjangeren domineres av mannlige spillere. Derfor er det heller ikke overraskende at kvinneandelen i sportsspill ikke har hatt samme økning som i spill som kan spilles på ulike spillplattformer. Kortspillet *Hearthstone* er et godt eksempel på sistnevnte.

I fremtiden kan økt bruk av VR- og AR-teknologi i sportsspill bidra til å bryte ned plattformskillene i spillverdenen i dag og åpne opp for et større mangfold av spillere, uavhengig av foretrukket spillplattform. Maria Stukoff, en av paneldeltakerne under e-sportkonferansen i Lausanne og direktør for den teknologiske avdelingen ved Universitetet i Salford, fremhevet betydningen av nettopp dette under konferansen (IOC, 2018). Hun ser for seg en teknologisk utvikling der man om 10–15 års tid vil kunne koble vanlige mobiltelefoner sammen med VR- og AR-teknologi, samt ulike kroppssensorer som kan registrere og måle for eksempel bevegelser og pulsen til spillerne, og med dette skape en helt ny og virkelighetsnær spillopplevelse med høy vekt på fysisk utøvelse (IOC Media, 2018). Dette er en utvikling IOC har uttalt at de ønsker for e-sport, men samtidig en utvikling som kan bidra til å minske e-sportens kjønnsblandede konkurranseformer. En utvikling mot mer fysisk krevende spill kan også tenkes å bidra til at man mister noe av inkluderingspotensialet e-sport har overfor personer med fysiske funksjonsnedsettelse. Det er med andre ord uklart om en satsing på AR- og VR-teknologi vil fremme eller hemme likestilling i e-sport i fremtiden. Dette avhenger nok av hvordan teknologiene utvikles og implementeres i de ulike spillsjangerne.

AVSLUTTENDE REFLEKSJONER

IOC har et uttalt ønske om å inkludere e-sport i OL i fremtiden. Dette begrunnes blant annet med at e-sport har et unikt likestillingspotensial ved å bli en OL-gren der kvinnelige og mannlige utøvere konkurrerer på like vilkår i samme konkurranse. Slik vi har illustrert i dette kapitlet, er det derimot ikke sikkert at kjønnsblandet konkurranse er den mest fruktbare strategien for å oppnå bedre likestilling i e-sport. Inkludering av e-sport i OL vil innebære flere kjønnspolitiske dilemmaer. Vår ambisjon i dette kapitlet har vært å sette søkelys på noen av disse dilemmaene, knyttet til (1) manglende spillbare kvinnelige karakterer i sportsspill, (2) kjønnsulikhet i økonomiske rammevilkår i profesjonell e-sport, (3) diskriminering og seksuell trakassering av kvinnelige e-sportspillere og (4) kjønnede preferanser i valg av spillplattform.

Veien til e-sport som en olympisk idrettsgren, preget av like vilkår og muligheter for kvinnelige og mannlige spillere, er fortsatt lang. Dersom e-sport skal bli en del av den olympiske idrettsbevegelsen, må utfordringene med trakassering av kvinner adresseres. Kvinnelige spillere er langt mer utsatt for

diskriminering i form av negative og seksuelt trakasserende kommentarer enn mannlige spillere i e-sportens verden (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018; Ask et al., 2016; Taylor, 2012; Jenson & de Castell, 2018; Cote, 2017; Ratan et al., 2015). IOC har anerkjent disse utfordringene på e-sportkonferansen i Lausanne (2018) og organisasjonens åttende toppmøte (2019). I henhold til IOCs satsing på full likestilling i alle medaljeøvelser i fremtidige OL kan e-sporten ende med å stå overfor et veikryss. E-sportens aktører må bestemme seg for om e-sport skal fortsette å være en konkurransedrevet underholdningsindustri der kvinnelige spillere risikerer å forbli utsatte målskiver for diskriminering og trakassering, eller om man skal gjøre en større innsats for å bekjempe problemene med kjønnsdiskriminering. Det sistnevnte vil trolig være et nødvendig grep for å legitimere seg selv som en olympisk idrett.

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ARTICLE III

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**Media (Re)presentation of a Black Woman Esports Player: The Case of Chiquita Evans
in the NBA 2K League**

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Abstract

Alongside the general growth of esports, traditional sport video game titles have become increasingly popular and integrated into traditional sports organizations. However, low representation of women has been a significant concern with the merging of gaming and traditional sports. In 2019, Chiquita Evans became the first woman player to be drafted to the NBA 2K League, the esports equivalent of the North American basketball league. Drawing on Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) and feminist poststructuralist frameworks, this study aimed to explore dominant media discourses within the media coverage of Evans' barrier-breaking participation. The FDA revealed that media representations of Evans were influenced by three major discourses, centered on: biological sex difference, coping, and sports performance. Drawing on these discourses, the findings suggest that although media constructions of Evans may work to increase her respect and acceptance in a highly male-dominated domain, they simultaneously reproduce established gendered stereotypes and esports power dynamics.

Keywords: black woman players, esports, gender, discourse analysis, sports video games

**Media (Re)presentation of a Black Woman Esports Player: The Case of Chiquita Evans
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Esports (organized multiplayer video game competitions) is a rapidly growing global industry; global revenues exceeded \$1 billion for the first time in 2020 and total viewership was expected to rise to 495 million (Newzoo, 2020). Concurrently, esports leagues based on traditional sports video game (SVG) titles have become increasingly popular. For instance, the NBA 2K League, based on the popular basketball video game series NBA 2K, has gained two million followers and 441 million views on social media since its emergence in 2018 (NBA 2K League, 2020). As a joint venture between the game publisher Take-Two Interactive and the North American National Basketball Association (NBA), the NBA 2K League was among the first of a rising number of esports leagues operated by a professional sports league (Mirabito & Kucek, 2019).

However, the convergence of esports and traditional sports has received limited research attention. The overall dearth of female representation, both as playable characters within games and as competitors in the leagues, has been criticized (Bailey, Miyata, & Yoshida, 2021; Darvin, Mumcu, & Pegoraro, 2021; Mirabito & Kucek, 2019). In fact, women only account for 5 percent of all esports players. Moreover, women players are frequently subjected to exclusion, sexual harassment and gendered stereotypes (Rogstad, 2021; Ruvalcaba et al., 2018; Taylor, 2012). As a result, SVGs such as NBA 2K constitute incredibly precarious cultures for women players (Darvin & Sagas, 2017; Robnett & John, 2020). Girls and women who participate in male-dominated gaming environments experience gendered barriers in the form of sexism, harassment, and unequal treatment (Jenson & de Castell, 2018; Ruvalcaba, Shulze, Kim, Berzenski, & Otten, 2018), resulting in lower representation of women. SVGs are among the least popular genres among women players; only 2% of SVG players are women (Yee, 2017). This unequal gender balance provides a

vital setting in which to explore the representation and acceptance of women in esports. This is especially true of NBA 2K, which recently drafted its first woman player.

In March 2019, Chiquita “Chiquitae126” Evans made history by becoming the first woman player to be drafted in the second season of NBA 2K League. Given this unique opportunity to prove that women also belong on the virtual basketball court, her barrier-breaking participation generated significant media attention. Although Evans’ debut may be a significant step toward improving the inclusion and representation of women in SVG environments, reactions to her participation have yet to be sufficiently examined. Therefore, the present study aimed to critically examine relevant media discourses and the media’s construction of Evans through a discourse analysis of relevant media texts. Feminist poststructuralist theory (Butler, 2006, 2011; Foucault, 1972, 1977, 1978; Weedon, 1997) was used to examine these representations.

Although esports has been considered to hold great potential in terms of fostering equitable and bias-free competition because of the low relevance of physical attributes compared to traditional sports, research has demonstrated that gaming cultures have continued to evolve along gender lines (Jenson & de Castell, 2018; Rogstad, 2021; Taylor, 2012). Women and other minority players are prime targets of sexism, harassment, and discrimination, resulting in the constitution of gaming as a highly masculine domain (Darvin, Vooris, & Mahoney, 2020; Ruvalcaba et al., 2018). SVGs’ direct integration into traditional sports’ organizational frameworks may further influence or intensify these issues (Frandsen, 2020). Moreover, as a black woman player, Evans has experienced frequent instances of racism (Turner, 2019). This exposure to racism and racial stereotypes forms unique experiences for women of color in gaming, which remain underexplored (Leonard, 2006; Rankin & Han, 2019; Schelfhout, Bowers, & Hao, 2019).

To address these research gaps, this study aimed to examine the underlying interpretations and power dynamics related to media representations constructed around Evans, to advance an esports gender equality agenda (Kavoura, Kokkonen, Chroni, & Ryba, 2017). Hence, the research question was defined as:

RQ: How was Chiquita Evans constructed in the media in relation to established gendered stereotypes and power dynamics within esports during her participation in the 2019 NBA 2K League season?

In the following, I first provide a short review of the current research on gender and race in esports and SVGs. Subsequently, I describe the theoretical framework, methods, and materials, before presenting my analysis of media constructions of Evans as she became the first woman player in the NBA 2K League.

Literature Review

More than two decades of research has confirmed the predominance of masculinity and the male gamer stereotype in gaming environments, as well as the negative effects they have for women in these areas (Jenson & de Castell, 2018; Paaßen, Morgenroth, & Stratemeyer, 2017; Taylor, 2012). Gaming communities and industries are often hostile to women and nonbinary people and filled with gender stereotypes, sexism, and harassment (Paaßen et al., 2017; Ratan, Taylor, Hogan, Kennedy, & Williams, 2015; Ruvalcaba et al., 2018; Shen, Ratan, Cai, & Leavitt, 2016; Taylor, 2012). Witkowski (2018) noted that many esports settings frequently frame gender dualistically: female/male, woman/man, and femininity/masculinity. Therefore, women players may be trapped in an imaginary categorical essentialist framing while simultaneously performing everyday professional play and personal identity work (Witkowski, 2018).

Although men and women play video games in relatively similar numbers, video gaming remains strongly perceived as a male activity (Paaßen et al., 2017). This stereotype is often justified by arguing that women cannot be considered “true” or “hard-core” gamers because they allegedly play more casually and less skillfully (Paaßen et al., 2017). However, scholars such as Shen et al. (2016) have challenged this perceived participation and performance gender gap, concluding that the female inferiority stereotype is not only false, but may contribute to unequal participation in gaming. Ratan et al. (2015) suggested that this stereotype affects women’s self-assessment of personal skills, even when these skills are equal to those of men. Stereotype Threat Theory (Steele & Aronson, 1995) can be used to offer a possible explanation: When members of a stereotyped group find themselves in situations where they think they are performing as a representative of that group, they frequently feel stressed over the possibility of confirming those negative stereotypes in front of others. This tension can have a damaging impact on women players’ performances and discourage them from playing (Chan, 2008; Paaben et al., 2017).

Women of Color in Gaming

While research has shed light on gendered barriers and equality issues in gaming and esports, most studies have primarily focused on gender homogeneously (Everett & Watkins, 2008; Richard, 2013a). According to Gray (2012), the favoring of the typical (white male) gamer in video game culture has resulted in the perpetuation of whiteness and masculinity, as well as marginalization of many minority gamers, who are labeled deviant. Compared to Caucasian women players, women of color are subjected to a different reality and set of social injustices that are commonly overlooked by mainstream feminism (Rankin & Han, 2019); they are targets of both misogyny and racial slurs (Richard, 2016). Further, the unequal treatment of marginalized players may share symbiotic ties with the portrayal of minorities

within video games (Richard, 2013b). Previous studies have documented how depictions of people of color within games are often stereotypical. For instance, 83% of all African-American video game characters were featured in SVGs (Glaubke, Miller, Parker, & Espejo, 2001), which may have produced an assumption that most African-American players prefer to play SVGs (Peterson, 2018). Furthermore, Black characters within SVGs are generally presented as “verbally aggressive and extraordinarily muscular and athletic” (Everett & Watkins, 2008).

However, apart from in-game character representation and content analyses of what games are lacking, previous research has generally overlooked cross-gender player perspectives and their intersections with race, ethnicity, culture, gender, and sexuality (Richard & Gray, 2018). Although Leonard (2006) urged researchers to address this gap, research remains at an early stage (Richard & Gray, 2018). Although some studies have begun to explore the experiences of women of color in esports and gaming culture (e.g., Hussain, Yu, Cunningham, & Bennett, 2021; Rankin & Han, 2019; Richard, 2016), more work is urgently required (Richard & Gray, 2018). By examining the experiences of Chiquita Evans as the first woman player in the NBA 2K League, the present study aims to contribute both to our scarce knowledge of women of color in esports and of professional women players in the field of SVGs.

Theoretical Framework

To explore the underlying gendered interpretations and esports power dynamics through media coverage of Evans, I drew upon feminist poststructuralist theory (Butler, 2006, 2011; Foucault, 1972, 1977, 1978; Weedon, 1997). Within poststructuralist theory, the term “subjectivity” refers to an individual’s conscious and unconscious ideas and feelings, as well as their sense of self and ways of relating to their position in society (Weedon, 1997).

Poststructuralism suggests a fluid, ambiguous, and in-progress subjectivity that is continuously produced and reproduced in language and discourse (Weedon, 1997).

Foucault's discourse theory (1972, 1978) provides a theory of language and social power that incorporates the poststructuralist idea of subjectivity. It carefully considers the institutional influence of discourse and how it shapes and controls individual subjects (Weedon, 1997). Discourse is a way of producing knowledge, as well as the cultural norms, subjectivities, and dynamics of power (and their interconnections) that are embedded in such knowledge (Foucault, 1972, 1978). Discourses form and seek to control individuals' conscious and unconscious thoughts and feelings, for instance by presenting particular ways of being as acceptable or natural, while marginalizing others (Weedon, 1997). The ability of discourse to form individuals' minds and bodies is inextricably connected to a larger network of power relations, often with institutional underpinnings (Weedon, 1997).

The nature of femininity and masculinity is one of the primary sites of discursive conflict for individuals, where a commonsense, gendered idea of social behavior seeks to establish specific types of masculinity and femininity as natural (Weedon, 1997). In this vein, feminist theorists such as Butler (2006, 2011) and Weedon (1997) have demonstrated how Foucault's concept of discourse theory can be used to explain how women frequently become instruments of their own oppression by (intentionally or unintentionally) confining themselves to the prevailing binary gendered logic.

Focusing on the connection between discourse and power, Foucault (1978) coined the term "subject position" to describe how individuals are placed in social hierarchies. Subject position describes the individual's position in relation to dominant discourses; it influences their thoughts, emotions, and practices and provides various possibilities for and restrictions of action (Weedon, 1997). Gendered subject positions are formed in various ways: by common ideas of ideal appearance and behavior, by social norms involving either approval or

punishment depending on one's adherence to them, through certain definitions of pleasure that are presented as acceptable and suggest ways of being a woman, and by the limited possibility of negotiating gender within certain discourses (Weedon, 1997). For instance, women who choose to engage in esports risk social, psychological, and economic consequences, e.g., harassment, limited access to competitions and player communities, and restricted sponsorship opportunities (Taylor, 2012; Witkowski, 2018; Jenson & de Castell, 2018).

Method

Data Collection

In the present article, I conducted Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) on media texts relating to Chiquita Evans' participation as the first woman player in the 2019 NBA 2K League season. "Text" is broadly defined, including written texts, images, audio, videos, streams, podcasts, etc. (Bratberg, 2021). The data were limited to media texts published from when Evans was drafted to the second NBA 2K League season (March 2019) until her unsuccessful re-draft to the league's fourth season (March 2021).

The sample search was conducted in online spaces that were likely to discuss and report on Evans and her experiences, including: (1) the NBA 2K League's official website, Twitch channel, and YouTube channel; (2) her team's (Warriors Gaming Squad) official website, Twitch channel, and YouTube channel; and (3) online news media, and news-related gaming and esports websites identified through Google.

The initial search resulted in 35 media texts that specifically related to Evan's participation in the NBA 2K League. After reading through all texts, nine texts were excluded on the grounds that they only referred to other media texts (copy-paste journalism). As a result, the final sample consisted of 26 relevant media texts (for the list of texts, see works in

the reference list marked *). Evans' participation was covered in a variety of English-speaking media outlets: online news sites (ABC News, ESPN.com, Los Angeles Times, The Athletic, The Lily, Reuters), online content produced by the NBA 2K League (articles, broadcasts, podcasts, and videos), news-related esports and gaming websites (Cheddar Esports, Dot Esports, GamesIndustry.biz, Kotaku, Polygon, SportTechie, The Score, Upcomer), and news-related websites focusing on intersections of race, sports, gaming, and culture (Black Girl Nerds, The Undefeated).

Analysis

The media texts included in the final sample were analyzed following Willig's (2013) six steps of FDA: (1) discursive constructions, (2) discourses, (3) action orientation, (4) positioning, (5) practice, and (6) subjectivity. The following analysis of the selected media texts is twofold: in the next section, the first step of Willig's approach is used to reveal the discursive constructions of Evans as the first woman player in the NBA 2K League. This was achieved by locating and categorizing all references to Evans and her participation and identifying common understandings and interpretations.

In the second section, following the next steps of Willig's approach, the different discourses, subject positions, and identity negotiations contained within the discursive constructions of Evans are discussed: 1) locating the discursive constructions of Evans within wider discourses, 2) considering the discursive context within which the constructions of Evans were deployed; 3) determining which subject positions the constructions of Evans articulate; 4) examining which possibilities for action are made available by these constructions, and 5) considering different types of subjective experiences that the discursive constructions might provide. These steps revealed certain discourses upon which media

representations of Evans were built; each discourse provides distinct opportunities for action and ways of positioning Evans as a player.

Results

Discursive Constructions of Evans as the First Woman Player in the NBA 2K League

Following Willig's (2013) first step of FDA, the analysis revealed three major discursive constructions of Evans: 1) as an exceptional athletic woman player in a (white) male domain, 2) as a capable but feminine player, and 3) as a player between sports and media logics.

Evans as an Exceptional Athletic Woman Player in a (White) Male Domain

As the only woman player in the NBA 2K League and one of only a few professional women in esports, Evans' barrier-breaking participation received significant media attention (Li, 2019; Obringer, 2019). Accordingly, Evans is frequently confronted in various media texts with beliefs that women cannot perform as well as men because of innate physical or mental differences (NBA 2K League, 2019b; Valentine, 2019). Evans responded, "I don't feel like because I'm a female and you're a male that we're different when it comes to video games. You being a male doesn't make you superior at moving your hands and clicking button and keys" (Turner, 2019). Some media texts highlighted speculations from some parts of the NBA 2K community that women players lack the athleticism needed to compete with men at this level (The Breakfast Club, 2019), to which Evans replied, "That has absolutely nothing to do with being a professional 2K League player. I'm not physically out there. Who's to say we aren't athletic? I'm actually very athletic. So that defeats the point" (Turner, 2019). Moreover, the media coverage further contributed to the construction of Evans as a naturally athletic player through descriptions of her physical appearance. For instance, she is described as having "the easy grace of an athlete" (Tsukayama, 2019), an impressive

“physical prowess and a seemingly endless supply of adrenaline” (Turner, 2019), and as a player “blessed with height and natural strength” (Faris, 2019).

According to Foucault (1978), gendered physical capabilities are defined through certain sets of human-biology-related knowledge. Weedon (1997) noted that notions of biological sex difference, both observable and imagined, are frequently used to maintain male dominance and social order. Although biological sex differences have not been found to influence esports performance (Shen et al., 2016), such retrograde notions are still commonly used within gaming environments to explain gender disparities (Shen et al., 2016; Taylor, 2012). Moreover, previous research has suggested that the media frequently portrays Black athletes in terms of their physicality (Grainger, Newman, & Andrews, 2006), especially in physical sports such as basketball (van Sterkenburg & Knoppers, 2004). Although Evans rejects the relevance of physical attributes in esports, media portrayals nonetheless highlight her athleticism. Being subjected to a discourse of biological sex difference, Evans is constructed as an exceptionally athletic woman, legitimizing her participation in a male-dominated environment.

As women esports players are often considered as anomalies, deviations, or exceptions, their gaming affiliation, dedication, and capability are frequently contested and challenged through taunts, harassment, and sexism (Taylor, 2012). Several media reports described Evans’ singular treatment online after her team’s defeats, in which she is told that “she is trash,” that she “don’t deserve to be where she is at,” and that she should have “stayed in the kitchen” (Boren, 2019; Mitchell, 2019; Valentine, 2019). Moreover, as a Black woman player, Evans stated that she had experienced frequent instances of racism (Turner, 2019). However, in the media texts, Evans claimed her most challenging issue was that male players often refused to include her in games if they knew she was a woman (Boren, 2019; NBA 2K League, 2019c). In her first qualifying game to the league, this became a major problem: “The

first time I got on the mic to communicate with my teammates they made remarks like, ‘Oh, that’s a girl?’ and they would just ice me out. It was very discouraging” (Pingue, 2019).

Consequently, Evans explained how many women players hide their identities to avoid harassment and exclusion:

A lot of women are afraid to let it be known that they are women. A lot of women don’t even get on the mic because they don’t want people to know who they’re playing with. That’s a big issue — that we don’t feel comfortable enough to be in our own skin. We have to hide who we are to be accepted. (Turner, 2019)

People who do not conform to established social norms risk being disciplined and/or punished by social mechanisms (Foucault, 1977, 1978). Evans’ experiences and setbacks related to gendered barriers and expectations support previous findings that have described how players outside of the stereotypical white, male “gamer” frame are perceived as “others,” anomalies, or exceptions and therefore risk harassment (Cote, 2017; Taylor, 2012; Paaßen et al. 2017; Rogstad, 2021). Experiences of misogyny and racism are found to serve as an access filter within gaming environments, marginalizing and discouraging many women from engaging; only the most persevering women remain (Taylor, 2012; Richard, 2016). Thus, esports is constructed as a male domain in which only a few women such as Evans have adequate coping strategies, dedication, determination, and patience to overcome gendered barriers and challenges.

Evans as a Capable (but Feminine) Player

Women who enter male-dominated domains are often expected to conform to prevailing (masculine) practices while simultaneously making a difference as women actors (Hovden, 2004). Sporting abilities (e.g., power, competitiveness, aggression, and teamwork)

have traditionally been considered masculine traits; women athletes are thus required to prove their equal competence while maintaining a feminine identity (Cahn, 2015).

On the one hand, media portrayals of Evans focus on her struggles to prove herself as the first woman player. One journalist noted, “When you’re the only woman in a league of 126 players, some people will inevitably wonder whether you belong there, especially if you’re not immediately dominating the competition” (Sarkar, 2019). To legitimize Evans as a player, her background as a former semi-professional basketball player is frequently mentioned as a site where she has developed knowledge of basketball, tactical and team training, competitive spirit, and the sports lifestyle (Cohen, 2019; Jackson, 2019; Starkey, 2019b; Tsukayama, 2019). This background is described as almost unique among NBA 2K players, regardless of gender, and has allowed Evans to almost seamlessly transition to virtual basketball (Davidson, 2019; NBA 2K League, 2019c). For instance, one of her competitors said, “She has the basketball IQ. Most people would be like, ‘I’m playing with a girl. She’s not going to know what to do.’ She knows what she’s doing. You can tell.” (Cohen, 2019).

On the other hand, Evans is portrayed in a more maternal and caring role, as commonly prescribed to women (Butler, 2006; Weedon, 1997). When competing, the whole team lives and practices together on most days, eventually becoming “like a family” (Starkey, 2019b). As a 30-year-old, Evans is among the league’s oldest players (the majority are aged around 20-22). She is described as a mature, caring, and stabilizing player that keeps the team together and takes charge when her younger teammates lose focus (Cole, 2021). Outside competition, she is said to spend time with her family, sharing a particularly strong bond with her mother who had recently undergone surgery (Cole, 2021; Starkey, 2019a; Starkey, 2019b).

Such double and conflicting expectations regarding acceptable levels of both sporting competence and femininity place women in a precarious position associated with feelings of

lack of respect, trust, and personal appreciation (Hovden, 2004). Within gaming environments, women players' love of competition, games, and technology regularly positions them as unfeminine, "other," or anomalous, unless compensatory signals are provided (Taylor, 2012). Although Evans' portrayal as a highly knowledgeable and capable player may present an empowering identity, the compensation of this identity through emphasized femininity serves to reinforce esports performance as a masculine trait (Cahn, 2015).

Evans as a Player Between Sport and Media Logics

The NBA's integration of esports through the NBA 2K League reveals a nascent process of mediatization that demonstrates how practices and values in esports are influenced by current logic in traditional sports, while also demonstrating how the institution of sports is directly and profoundly influenced by media and communication logic (Frandsen, 2020). Thus, popular elite sport narratives and features related to the globalized digital media culture connected with esports both constitute important components in the construction of Evans as a professional NBA 2K player.

On the one hand, Evans is described as a kind of "assistant coach," a lead tactician who her teammates look up to during tactical training sessions (Cole, 2021). The optimalization and rationalization of esports performance by means commonly associated with traditional sports, e.g., the implementation of tactical training, can be interpreted as the sportification of gaming culture (Frandsen, 2020). In this vein, her experiences as a semi-professional sports athlete and talented "real" basketball player made her a valuable team asset. Accordingly, when interviewed, her team manager said, "We were trying to evolve towards a more of a real basketball style of play and so she really fit into what we were trying to build" (Cole, 2021).

On the other hand, traditional sports organizations' integration of esports has increased the importance of media exposure at the expense of skills directly related to gameplay. Thus, players' presence, activity, and engagement online may become equally important as their in-game performance. Evans, described as a relatively quiet player focusing more on her gaming performance than audience interaction, was told by team officials to increase her online engagement online to stand out more (Cole, 2021). Subsequently, Evans encouraged other players to pay more attention to this aspect of professional gaming:

People have to understand that the NBA 2K League is more than just playing NBA 2K, it is a business. They are going to want more than just stick skills in return, they will want personality and to know whether they can trust you with their brand. (Cole, 2021)

Although Evans was drafted to the NBA 2K League, she did not feel comfortable expressing herself online as she would have liked, due to fear of harassment (Cole, 2021; Warriors Gaming, 2019). This has also affected other women players, who are expected to stay active online despite abuse, placing them in a demanding, exhausting, or even impossible position, with many eventually quitting gaming (Taylor, 2018).

Discourses, Subject Positions, and Identity Negotiations

My analysis found that media representations of Evans and her experiences as the first woman player in the NBA 2K League were based on three different discourses, centered on: biological sex difference, coping, and sports performance. These discourses constituted multiple media representations of Evans, each positioning the player differently and presenting her with various opportunities for action and possible subject positions. These media representations are now discussed, including how they served to construct Evans' experiences and particular ways of relating to her surrounding environments.

Biological Sex Difference

Despite wanting to attract more women players, the esports industry's promotion and marketing discourses have contributed to the perpetuation of gender stereotypes whereby women are unambitious casual players and men are committed hardcore players (Paaßen et al., 2017). Such notions are often mixed with beliefs about the inherently limited abilities of women to advance in gaming, resulting in a discourse of biological sex difference which valorizes signs of physical strength and athleticism and positions women players as inferior (Taylor, 2012; Weedon, 1997). Evans found herself subjected to this discourse:

A lot of people feel as though we don't understand the game like guys do, or we aren't capable of playing at a high level, and that's not the case. A lot of people even brought up athleticism and playing basketball in real life, when I probably have more basketball experience than the majority of them. (Valentine, 2019)

Although Evans rejected any connection between athleticism and esports performance, she also responded to her subjection to the biological sex difference discourse by highlighting her vast athletic experiences (Turner, 2019; Valentine, 2019). Thus, to justify her participation in the male-dominated NBA 2K League, she occupies a subject position as an exceptional or special woman (Nooney, 2013). Although this identity works to gain Evans respect and acceptance in the NBA 2K community, it simultaneously reproduces beliefs that connect physicality and athleticism to NBA 2K performance. Consequently, this representation serves to maintain rather than challenge notions of biological sex difference (Weedon, 1997).

Coping Discourse

Evans' team coach stated:

Any player that's played where she's been at, there's a certain mindset and toughness you have to have about yourself. You have to have grit and competitiveness to reach the level she did. (Faris, 2019)

Related to the discursive construction of esports as a male domain through frequent instances of harassment, sexism, and exclusionary treatment of women players, Evans is constructed as a tough and resilient woman who can withstand the toxicity women players are often exposed to, to fulfill her dream of becoming a professional player.

On the one hand, this representation of Evans can constitute an empowering identity containing a certain degree of agency, recognition, and self-awareness (Foucault, 1983). For instance, in one interview regarding the improvement of women's conditions in esports, Evans said, "It starts with women ourselves. We have to learn to have tough skin and just go out there and compete, no matter what anyone says" (NBA 2K League, 2019a). Nonetheless, a particular form of subjectivity is established, based on an expectation that women players should be immune to abuse (Taylor, 2018), necessitating the significant psychological labor of "toughening up." Therefore, women players are placed in a demanding situation where many either choose to give up or face stress resulting from their self-perceived inability to toughen up (Taylor, 2018). As this identity construction requires coping strategies as a response to inequality, it maintains existing power relations and gender barriers.

This coping discourse constitutes a gendered subject position entailing expectation of conformity to the current gender order and stereotypes, which is reinforced by punishment for those who fail to do so (Foucault, 1977, 1978; Weedon, 1997). In line with Evans' experiences, research has documented how women esports players experience hostility and mistreatment at higher rates (Darvin et al., 2020; Ruvalcaba et al., 2018). Although coping

strategies and identity management have become vital tools for women to gain acceptance as players and mitigate the risk of negative behavior (Cote, 2017; Shen et al., 2016, Taylor, 2012), players who take a passive stance towards harassment may risk being involved in the erasure of women as participants and expert actors in male-dominated areas (Witkowski, 2018).

Sports Performance Discourse

Drawing on a sports performance discourse, frequent invocations of Evans' background as a semi-professional basketball player were used to construct an identity of Evans as a highly committed and experienced sportswoman. Her background is considered to have prepared her for the demanding professional gaming lifestyle and the additional pressure and attention that comes with being the league's first and only woman (NBA 2K League, 2019b; Tsukayama, 2019). Moreover, her natural talent and embodied knowledge of "real" basketball (e.g., tactical aspects of training and play, teamwork) were described as being transferable into a kind of "natural skill" for playing NBA 2K (Cheddar Esports, 2019; Seiner, 2019).

Dedication and team loyalty are highlighted as fundamental aspects of this identity construction. One journalist noted, "the overriding theme – seemingly every other word – is *the team*. Her answers always come back to competitive play, and working on the game so she can help her teammates in any way possible" (Sarkar, 2019). In comparison, players who ignore team efforts in favor of individual accomplishment are seen as "high egos," "stat chasers," and "ball hogs" (Cole, 2021; Warriors Gaming, 2019). Although this may be an empowering identity, some media texts explained her relentless competitive focus based on ideas of meritocracy that infuse gaming environments. For instance, one journalist noted that the meritocratic expectations in parts of the NBA 2K community have led to the following

assumption: “if there are women who deserve to make it, they will” (Sarkar, 2019). Consequently, Evans often finds herself subjected to scrutiny and high performance expectations: “Some people have said I got drafted because it was a publicity stunt and stuff like that. So I feel like I have to into the season with a chip on my shoulder to show people that I actually earned this” (Pingue, 2019). Ultimately, Evans described her major challenge as “Proving myself. Proving that I belong, because a lot of people feel like I don’t belong here” (NBA 2K League, 2019a).

Women players who display enjoyment and passion for gaming are commonly positioned as unfeminine or “different” (Kennedy, 2005) and for many their dedication is continuously questioned (Taylor, 2012). However, as invocations of players’ previous sporting experiences are important when framing their esports’ performance (Taylor, 2012), drawing on a sports performance discourse may help to situate women players’ devotion for competition, video games, and esports as a career, and gain respect in male-dominated areas (Taylor, 2012). However, linked with gaming’s meritocratic values, this identity also requires the meritocratic subject’s individualized personal drive and demonstration of skills and confidence (Paul, 2018). Therefore, players are constantly being compared, without regard for social mechanisms and structural barriers that tend to favor men and boys (Paul, 2018). Moreover, this identity construction of Evans also necessitates loyalty to her team and behavior in accordance with established norms and ways of doing. Therefore, this identity construction does not challenge or critique existing power dynamics within esports.

Conclusion

Drawing on FDA, the present study explored how dominant media discourses formed the media’s construction of Chiquita Evans as the first woman player in the NBA 2K League. These media representations were found to draw on three main discourses, centered on:

biological sex difference, coping, and sports performance. Overall, the analysis revealed that the media's construction of Evans remained embedded within traditional gendered stereotypes and power structures that necessitated the negotiation of femininity. Although several media texts acknowledged that gender itself does not influence performance, esports' strong link with an implicit masculine discourse means that participation in competition settings is constituted as inherently gendered. Accordingly, media portrayals of Evans utilize discourses related to athleticism and sportsmanship (natural dedication, competitiveness, and embodied sport knowledge) as a way for Evans to gain acceptance and respect as a woman player. Although this construction of Evans as an exceptional, athletic woman may produce a positive and empowering female identity, it does not challenge dominant esports power dynamics. It reproduces beliefs concerning biology and athleticism that position (ordinary) women as inferior.

Overall, the narrow construction of player identity embedded within traditional discourses of athleticism and sports seemingly outlines the underlying essence of sporting discourse and the drive to achieve acceptance and mitigate marginalization (Meân & Kassing, 2008). Consequently, the media's construction of Evans works to encourage respect and acceptance, while simultaneously reproducing established gendered stereotypes and power dynamics, demonstrating a seemingly restricted number of alternative ways to construct women player identities even at the top level of NBA 2K. Thus, there is no guarantee that increased representation of women will challenge existing power dynamics or produce alternative, opposing, and specifically female discourses (Weedon, 1997). Therefore, to further the gender equity agenda, future research should continue to critically examine and increase awareness of how the media's communicative practices preserve the hegemonic structure of the discursive field. Finally, future studies should continue to focus on race and ethnicity in the field of esports, an understudied topic. As this study found gender to be the

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most prevalent marker of inequality, more work focusing on intersectionality may prove to be fruitful in further exploring other aspects such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, and physical ability.

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ARTICLE IV

Rogstad, E. T., & Skauge, M. (2022). The importance of female characters in esports: A quantitative analysis of players' perceptions of gendered character representations in sports video games. In A. Tjønnndal (Ed.), *Social issues in esports* (pp. 65-80). Routledge.

5. The Importance of Female Characters in Esports: A Quantitative Analysis of Players' Perceptions of Gendered Character Representations in Sports Video Games

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Abstract

While the increasing popularity of esports has been substantial, representation and acceptance of women as both players and characters within the games constitute a major point of concern. This includes sports video games, which is among the least diverse esports genres in terms of female representation. This chapter discusses the role of female character representations in the overall marginalization of women in esports and gaming. While the recent growth of female characters in sports video games may be a positive step toward improving women's representation and inclusion in gaming, this development does not necessarily lead to increased inclusivity and equality within gaming environments. Based on an online survey of sports video games players, the current study aims to examine players' perceptions of this development in order to better understand the importance of female character representation in gaming. The results reveal a clear gendered pattern among respondents, indicating that women feel that female character options remain too scarce and poorly portrayed.

Introduction

The growing popularity of esports and its similarities with traditional sport have recently attracted the attention of many leading sports organisations, professional and local sports clubs and sports media outlets, all of which are becoming increasingly and systematically involved with esports games that simulate sports. This game genre is often referred to as sports video games (SVGs) and includes popular franchises such as FIFA and NBA 2K. Although the increasing popularity of SVGs has been met with curiosity and excitement by many esports and sports stakeholders, a major issue regarding the convergence of esports and traditional sport

relates to the overwhelming absence of women represented as both players and characters in esports based on SVGs (Bailey et al., 2021; Darvin et al., 2021). In fact, research indicates that girls and women only make up about 2% of all SVGs players (Yee, 2017). Moreover, female character options have long been significantly underrepresented in SVGs and other games genres (Lynch et al., 2016; Williams et al. 2009). Until the 2010s only a few of the most popular SVGs franchises included female characters (Brown, 2015; Jenson & de Castell, 2010). As a result, SVGs appear to constitute one of the least diverse genres of esports in terms of female representation (Yee, 2017).

The representation and proliferation of female characters play an important role in the overall marginalisation and negative stereotyping of women in esports and gaming (Paaßen et al., 2017). This issue encompasses a variety of esports game genres, including SVGs. Previous research has documented how female characters are often aligned with harmful stereotypes that portray female characters in overly sexualised ways and/or in subordinate roles (Bertozzi, 2008; Dill & Thill, 2007; Downs & Smith, 2010; Lynch et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2009). For instance, before the release of the popular American football game series Madden in 2015, the only women in the stadiums were lightly dressed cheerleaders (Brown, 2015). Such limited and stereotypical representations of women are problematic because they serve to reinforce the idea of esports as a male domain and discourage girls and women from playing (Consalvo, 2013; Lynch et al., 2016; Olsson, 2013). Furthermore, they also serve to perpetuate biased perceptions of women players' skills and capabilities (McArthur, 2020).

As the convergence of esports and traditional sport continues to increase, equal and balanced gender representation is crucial for achieving a gender-balanced and equal sport (Kruthika, 2020). A welcomed increase in female characters in most SVGs in recent years may be an important step towards increasing the inclusiveness and representation of women in gaming (Darvin et al., 2021). However, as this increase does not necessarily lead to more

inclusive and equal esports environments, a better understanding of players' perceptions about the increased number of female characters is needed (Darvin et al. 2021).

In this chapter we examine players' perceptions of female characters in SVGs and their importance for the players themselves. The research question is: *How do players perceive gendered character representations in the SVGs genre?*

To begin with, we present a brief overview of previous research on gender, identity and esports. Next, we outline the context of our study and methods before presenting and discussing our findings on players' perceptions of female characters in SVGs.

Research on Gender, Identity and Esports

Issues concerning gender and esports are closely connected to broader cultural and research discussions about gender, gameplay and technology (Jenson & de Castell, 2018; Rogstad, 2021). Abbiss (2008) reviewed three decades of research on gender and technology and revealed that computing is constructed as a masculine activity. In particular, girls were found to be portrayed as impaired due to limited interest in internet technology and “hard” computing (Abbiss, 2008). Massanari (2017) describes video games as part of a larger, toxic techno-culture centred around “an othering of those perceived as outside the culture...and a valorization of masculinity masquerading as a particular form of ‘rationality’” (p. 5). This othering of players who are not perceived as part of the majority norm of young, white, heterosexual men has led to a male gamer stereotype that positions women as players with limited dedication and gaming skills (Paaßen et al., 2017). Conversely, men are thought to be “hard-core” gamers who actively identify as gamers, play more competitive and advanced games on gaming consoles, and occasionally compete for prize money in esports competitions (Taylor, 2012). Paaßen et al. (2017) argue that the male gamer stereotype contributes to the marginalisation of women in video game culture, including negative psychological consequences, such as feelings of

unwelcomeness, reduced self-identification and direct and destructive psychological impacts of gender-based harassment. Furthermore, they argue that the longevity of this stereotype is related to the fact that men are almost exclusively represented in most professional roles and are prominent characters in the gaming culture. Similarly, women are significantly underrepresented as players, employees, fans and playable characters in the esports industry (Bailey et al., 2021; Darvin et al., 2021). Shen et al. (2016) argue that the male gamer stereotype generates a self-perpetuating cycle, wherein women players perceive themselves as outsiders and are discouraged from playing esports, thereby leading to the reinforcement of such stereotypes.

Game Content and Gendered Media Representations

The male gamer stereotype influences game producers' presumed core audiences, which results in the development of game content and marketing strategies directed at the stereotypical interests of young, male audiences (Paaßen et al., 2017). This includes the underrepresentation of female game characters and a proliferation of sexualised female character representations, such as emphasised breasts, buttocks and provocative clothing (Jansz & Martis, 2007; Lynch et al., 2016; Shen et al., 2016). The consequences of such female representations have been debated in scholarly literature. While some researchers argue that such content has no effect on female players (Davialt & Schott, 2013; Reinhard, 2009), others suggest that sexualised depictions of female characters may discourage female players from participating in esports and gaming (Hartmann & Klimmt, 2006; Reinecke et al., 2007; Vermeulen et al., 2011)

To develop a deeper understanding of gendered media representations and how these tend to foster the reproduction of existing gender norms, Shaw (2015) suggests drawing on Butler's (2006, 2009) theoretical concepts of performativity and precarity as an explanatory framework. According to Shaw (2015), media representations are inextricably linked with processes in which gender is produced in certain social settings to fulfil various objectives and

are dependent on a cultural acceptance of intelligibility. Performativity refers to Butler's (2006) understanding of identity as a continuous performance rendered natural by individuals. These identity performances are greatly influenced by the media, which frequently promotes certain representations of gender identities as desirable (Dixon, 2019). Precarity is closely related to performativity and is used to describe the process by which these performances are made comprehensible to others through larger networks of meaning (Butler, 2009). To destabilise categories individuals can perform in several different ways, although, "to be a subject at all requires first complying with certain norms that govern recognition – that make a person recognizable. And so, non-compliance calls into question the viability of one's life, the ontological conditions of one's persistence" (Butler, 2009, p. xii). Shaw (2015) argues that this articulation is useful in the context of consumer culture, as precarity allows for a politics of representation that favours the margins instead of reconceiving the core. Butler's notions of performativity and precarity may help to reveal how media representations make certain identities possible, plausible and liveable (Shaw, 2015). Thus, Butler's ideas help to demonstrate the political relevance of visibility beyond a basic reconstruction of profitable audiences without specifically focusing on "true" or "good" representations (Shaw, 2015).

Data and Methods

Participant Recruitment

The participants in the study were selected by a convenience sampling of members of multiple online SVG platforms, such as Reddit and Discords. The respondents were primarily recruited by posting on subreddits (subsections of the online discussion forum reddit.com), which was chosen due to the high representation of most SVGs and high levels of member interaction. Each of the sampled subreddits had between 6,500 and 1,100,000 subscribers. The SVGs included games simulating real sports (FIFA, Madden, MLB The Show, NBA 2K, NBA Live,

NHL, The Golf Club, Zwift), racing games (Assetto Corsa, iRacing, rFactor, F1) and “hybrid” games with a mixture of sport and fantasy elements (Rocket League, Mario Tennis, Mario Kart). Questionnaires were distributed via online survey- and data management software. The respondents were asked about their perceptions of gendered character representations in SVGs, playing habits and demographic information. Due to the initial low number of female respondents, the survey was additionally distributed on female-specific gaming forums and discord channels. A total number of 444 SVG players participated in the study. The data collection and analysis were performed in compliance with national research ethics norms, and the study was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data.

Variables and Descriptive Statistics

To explore players’ perceptions of gendered character representations in SVGs, the participants were asked to rate four statements: (1) *“I believe most sports video games portray women poorly”*, (2) *“Being able to play characters of the same gender as myself is important to me”*, (3) *“I feel that there are too few female characters in sports video games”*, and (4) *“I believe that more girls and women would engage in sports video games if there were more female characters in the games.”*

These four statements were developed based on similar studies related to perceptions of gendered character representations in video games (Duggan, 2015; Hall, 2015). The responses were rated on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = *“Strongly disagree”*, 7 = *“Strongly agree”*). As the study aimed to compare differences in responses at both ends of the Likert-scale, rather than various levels of agreement and disagreement, the responses were dichotomised with a cut-off value between 4 (*“Neither disagree nor agree”*) and 5 (*“Somewhat agree”*). As media consumption may be influenced by demographics other than gender (Brown et al., 2018), participants were asked to provide demographic information, such as age, education and ethnicity, which was then used as explanatory variables in the data analysis. Gaming frequency

was included as a control variable to determine any potential variances between people playing SVGs at least once a week (core players) and people playing less than once a week (casual players). Descriptive (univariate) statistics on the respondents' locations were included, although this variable was not used in the regression models. No changes (re-coding) were made to the explanatory variables compared to their initial (original) operationalisations in the questionnaire.

Analytical Design and Strategy

The ordinal (a numeric variable ordered categorically) dependent variables (the explained variation in *Y*) were utilised applying logistic regression. With regard to effect, the *sizes* (impact) odds and probabilities were used (Acock, 2014). As the output of multiple logistic regression - apart from positive or negative direction - is difficult to interpret directly based on coefficients, ORs and AVEs were predicted by calculating the predicted changes in odds and probabilities depending on social background. Stata 15 (Acock, 2014) was used to analyse the data.

Results

Tables 5.1a and 5.1b show the distribution of the dependent and explanatory variables in the analysis (descriptive statistics). Approximately half (53%, *N* = 166) of the respondents agreed that *“most sports video games portray women poorly”*. In addition, 61% (*N* = 258) of the respondents disagreed that *“being able to play characters of the same gender”* as themselves was important to them. In addition, 65% and 66% agreed that there were *“too few female characters in sports video games”* and that *“more girls and women would engage in sports video games if there were more female characters in the games”*..

As Table 5.1b shows, the sample consisted of 350 men (79%) and 94 women (21%). The participants were primarily between the ages of 16 and 35 (75%), located in North America, Central America (55%) or Europe (32%). Most of the respondents could be defined as core players (83%, N = 378) and 77 (17%) as casual players. Most of the participants were White (78%), with Asian (6%) and Hispanic (5%) as the second and third highest ethnicities.

Table 5.1a. Descriptive statistics of dependent variables.

Statements	N	%
I believe most sports video games portray women poorly		
<i>Disagree</i>	149	47
<i>Agree</i>	166	53
<i>Disagree male</i>	129	60
<i>Agree male</i>	87	40
<i>Disagree female</i>	14	16
<i>Agree female</i>	75	84
Being able to play characters of the same gender as myself is important to me		
<i>Disagree</i>	258	61
<i>Agree</i>	162	39
<i>Disagree male</i>	238	75
<i>Agree male</i>	79	25
<i>Disagree female</i>	13	14
<i>Agree female</i>	79	86
I feel that there are too few female characters in sports video games		
<i>Disagree</i>	148	35
<i>Agree</i>	275	65
<i>Disagree male</i>	137	43
<i>Agree male</i>	183	57
<i>Disagree female</i>	8	9
<i>Agree female</i>	85	91
I believe more girls and women would engage in sports video games if there were more female characters in the games		
<i>Disagree</i>	149	34
<i>Agree</i>	283	66
<i>Disagree male</i>	132	40
<i>Agree male</i>	197	60
<i>Disagree female</i>	11	12
<i>Agree female</i>	82	88

Table 5.1b. Descriptive statistics of explanatory variables and respondents' locations.

Variable	N	%
Gender		
<i>Male</i>	350	79
<i>Female</i>	94	21
Age		
<i>15 or younger</i>	22	5
<i>16–20</i>	75	17
<i>21–25</i>	132	29
<i>26–30</i>	85	19
<i>31–35</i>	47	10
<i>36–40</i>	40	9
<i>41–45</i>	27	6
<i>46–50)</i>	14	3
<i>51–55</i>	6	1
<i>61 or older</i>	3	1
Education		
<i>Less than high school diploma</i>	33	8
<i>High school degree or equivalent</i>	121	28
<i>Bachelor's degree</i>	159	37
<i>Master's degree</i>	101	24
<i>Doctorate</i>	12	3
Ethnicity		
<i>White</i>	349	78
<i>Hispanic or Latino</i>	24	5
<i>Black or African American</i>	12	3
<i>Native American or American Indian</i>	8	2
<i>Asian or Pacific Islander</i>	26	6
<i>Other</i>	26	6
Gaming frequency		
<i>Casual player (less than once a week)</i>	77	17
<i>Core player (at least once a week)</i>	378	83

The results indicate that female respondents had stronger preferences for gender representations generally and female representations, especially in SVGs, than men when controlled for social background and gaming frequency (Tables 5.2a–d). These findings are homogeneous and point in the same direction. All four dependent variables had significant gender effects at the <0.01 level. This did not apply to any of the other explanatory variables, except for education and age in one case each. Furthermore, the gender effects are stronger (based on ORs and AVEs) and more statistically robust (lower sig.-values) than those for education and age. That is, the outputs for gender are more substantial than those for education and age, implying that gender is the most crucial variable when analysing gendered SVG play reasons using this data.

Most of the variance is explained by “*Being able to play characters of the same gender as myself is important to me*” (Table 5.2b; McFadden = 0.241, LR-test = 122.66), while the least explained variable variance is “*I believe more girls and women would engage in sports video games if there were female characters in the games*” (Table 5.2d; McFadden = 0.064, LR-test = 33.13).

The greatest discrepancy in the gender outcomes is demonstrated for “*Being able to play characters of the same gender as myself is important to me*” (Table 5.2b). Applying the *margins* command in Stata reveals that holding the control variables constant, according to the formula $(OR-1) * 100$ equals the mean percentage change in odds by one unit change in the explanatory variable (X). The odds of agreeing rather than disagreeing with this statement are 1976% higher among women than men (95% CI [2.2253–3.812]), corresponding to a 63% higher probability (AVE statistics) for women ($p = 0.865$) compared to men ($p = 0.236$). This implies that white female core players with mean scores on age and education are 87% more likely to agree that playing characters of the same gender as themselves is important to them, compared to a similar male respondent having a 24% probability for obtaining level 1 on the dependent variable.

The gender gap in the variables is the smallest for “*I believe more girls and women would engage in sports video games if there were female characters in the games*” (Table 5.2d, OR = 6.263). The odds of agreeing rather than disagreeing with this statement are 5206% $(6.263-1) * 100$) higher among female than male respondents (95% CI [1.047–2.621]), corresponding to a 31% higher probability among women ($p = 0.905$) compared to men ($p = 0.604$).

The odds of agreeing compared with disagreeing with the statement “*I believe most sports video games portray women poorly*” are 43% (OR = 1.434) higher for each additional education level attained (Table 5.2a). As shown in Table 2b, the odds of agreeing rather than disagreeing with the statement “*Being able to play characters of the same gender as myself is*

important to me” are 18% (OR = 0.823) lower for each additional age category (ranging 1–10). This corresponds to a 26% lower probability among the oldest (age category 10, $p = 0.087$) than the youngest respondents (age category 1, $p = 0.354$).

Table 5.2a. Logistic regressions for “*I believe most sports video games portray women poorly*” (1 = Agree) (N = 289).

Variable	Coef.	SE	OR	AVE/ p	z	Sig.	[95% C. Int.]
Gender (1 = Female)	1.869	0.389	6.484	0 = 0.425 1 = 0.827	4.80	<0.001**	1.105 2.633
Age (1–10)	-0.118	0.081			-1.46	0.145	-0.277 0.040
Education (1–5)	0.361	0.167	1.434	1 = 0.272 5 = 0.614	2.16	0.031*	0.033 0.688
Ethnicity (ref. = White)							
Hispanic/ Latino	0.168	0.572			0.29	0.768	-0.952 1.289
Black/African American	0.003	1.087			0.00	0.997	-2.128 2.135
Native American/ American Indian	0.575	1.180			0.49	0.626	-1.738 2.888
Asian/Pacific Islander	0.279	0.467			0.60	0.549	-0.635 1.195
Other	0.644	0.520			1.24	0.216	-0.375 1.664
Gaming frequency (1 = Weekly)	-0.000	0.357			-0.00	0.999	-0.701 0.700
Constant	-0.878	0.600			-1.46	0.144	-2.056 0.299
-2LL	338.382						
LR χ^2 (9)	58.48					<0.001	
McFadden	0.147						
H-L GOF χ^2 (8)	12.56					0.127	

* $p < 0.05$

** $p < 0.01$

Coef. is sig. if $p\text{-value} < 0.05$

Table 5.2b. Logistic regressions for “*Being able to play characters of the same gender as myself is important to me*” (1 = Agree) (N = 376).

Variable	Coef.	SE	OR	AVE/p	z	Sig.	[95%]	C. Int.]
Gender (1 = Female)	3.032	0.397	20.758	0 = 0.236 1 = 0.865	7.63	<0.001**	2.253	3.812
Age (1–10)	-0.193	0.081	0.823	1 = 0.354 10 = 0.087	-2.37	0.018*	-0.354	-0.033
Education (1–5)	0.031	0.162			0.20	0.845	-0.286	0.350
Ethnicity (ref. = White)								
<i>Hispanic/Latino</i>	0.647	0.537			1.20	0.229	-0.406	1.701
<i>Black/African American</i>	0.098	0.724			0.14	0.892	-1.322	1.519
<i>Native American/American Indian</i>	0.554	1.263			0.44	0.661	-1.922	3.031
<i>Asian/Pacific Islander</i>	0.401	0.474			0.85	0.397	-0.527	1.331
<i>Other</i>	0.187	0.510			0.37	0.713	-0.813	1.188
Gaming frequency (1 = Weekly)	-0.120	0.361			-0.33	0.740	-0.827	0.587
Constant	-0.377	0.574			-0.66	0.511	-1.503	0.749
-2LL	385.474							
LR χ^2 (9)	122.66					<0.001		
McFadden	0.241							
H-L GOF χ^2 (8)	1.77					0.987		

*p<0.05

**p<0.01

Coef. is sig. if p-value< 0.05

Table 5.2c. Logistic regressions for “*I feel that there are too few female characters in sports video games*” (1 = Agree) (N = 372).

Variable	Coef.	SE	OR	AVE/p	z	Sig.	[95%]	C. Int.]
Gender (1 = Female)	1.999	0.448	7.388	0 = 0.580 1 = 0.910	4.45	<0.001**	1.120	2.879
Age (1–10)	0.104	0.071			1.47	0.142	-0.035	0.244
Education (1–5)	0.134	0.147			0.91	0.363	-0.155	0.423
Ethnicity (ref. = White)								
<i>Hispanic/Latino</i>	0.759	0.554			1.37	0.171	-0.328	1.846
<i>Black/African American</i>	0.513	0.714			0.72	0.472	-0.886	1.913
<i>Native American/American Indian</i>	-	-			-	-	-	-
<i>Asian/Pacific Islander</i>	0.514	0.475			1.08	0.279	-0.416	1.445
<i>Other</i>	-0.162	0.472			-0.34	0.731	-1.088	0.763
Gaming frequency (1 = Weekly)	0.151	0.347			0.43	0.664	-0.530	0.833
Constant	-0.628	0.549			-1.14	0.253	-1.704	0.448
-2LL	432.275							
LR χ^2 (8)	44.02					<0.001		
McFadden	0.092							
H-L GOF χ^2 (8)	3.95					0.861		

*p<0.05

**p<0.01

Coef. is sig. if p-value< 0.05

Table 5.2d. Logistic regressions for “I believe more girls and women would engage in sports video games if there were more female characters in the games” (1 = Agree) (N = 405).

Variable	Coef.	SE	OR	AVE/p	z	Sig.	[95% C. Int.]
Gender (1 = Female)	1.834	0.401	6.263	0 = 0.604 1 = 0.905	4.57	<0.001**	1.047 2.621
Age (1–10)	-0.002	0.063			-0.05	0.964	-0.127 0.122
Education (1–5)	0.013	0.109			0.12	0.904	-0.200 0.226
Ethnicity (ref. = White)							
Hispanic/Latino	0.405	0.507			0.80	0.424	-0.589 1.401
Black/African American	-0.084	0.659			-0.13	0.898	-1.377 1.209
Native American/American Indian	0.013	1.160			0.01	0.991	-2.260 2.287
Asian/Pacific Islander	0.022	0.458			0.05	0.961	-0.876 0.921
Other	0.152	0.496			0.31	0.759	-0.820 1.124
Gaming frequency (1= Weekly)	0.188	0.322			0.58	0.559	-0.443 0.821
Constant	0.208	0.484			0.43	0.667	-0.740 1.157
-2LL	479.632						
LR chi ² (9)	33.13					<0.001	
McFadden	0.064						
H-L GOF chi ² (8)	5.07					0.749	

*p<0.05

**p<0.01

Coef. is sig. if p-value< 0.05

Discussion

The representation of female characters in video games continues to be a source of concern for players, game developers, researchers and the other parties involved. This study has investigated how players perceive gendered character representations in SVGs. In the following discussion about our findings, we specifically focus on two topics: (1) female character options and (2) gendered character representations and player motivation.

Female character options

Being represented in the media is important for marginalised groups in the media such as women, as they act as important frames of reference that validate certain identities, regardless of whether one identifies with those representations (Shaw, 2015). Although women have become increasingly represented as game characters in most SVGs in recent years, many

players still feel that female character options are too limited (Newell, 2021). This is also reflected in the results of this study, which reveal that the majority of respondents, particularly women, feel that there are too few female characters in SVGs (see Table 5.2a). This is consistent with earlier studies of SVGs, which assert that female players wish to have the opportunity to play as female characters (De Jean et al., 1997; Olson, 2013). The importance of game character options can be explained by how individuals identify with specific identities in certain social contexts. Using the concept of performativity, Butler (2006) argues that identity is a performance. In other words, gender performance is what constitutes our understanding of gender. However, according to Butler's (2009) discussions about precarity, in order to be recognised by others such performances depend on larger structures of meaning. Shaw (2015) argues that this meaning process is closely linked to media representation. Butler's (2009) concept of precarity suggests that media representations make particular identities conceivable, credible and liveable. As such, game character representations become sites that allow or deny players to assume certain identities depending on the available character options (Taylor, 2006).

Although embodied identities, such as gender, are often thought to be unimportant in video game culture due to the common assumption that all players are white, heterosexual males (Taylor, 2012), Shaw (2015) argues that these identities become important for players who do not hold gender, racial and sexuality privilege. This argument is supported by this study, which demonstrates that being able to play characters of the same gender as themselves is more important to female than male participants (Table 5.2b). Furthermore, the perceived lack of representation of women in SVGs as game characters may contribute to the reinforcement of harmful differences between men's and women's sports that portray sport and esports as male domains (Consalvo, 2013; Darvin et al., 2021). Somewhat paradoxically, Williams et al. (2009) pointed out that female game characters may have the best chance of appearing in SVGs, as the games in this genre often aim to resemble rosters of real-life sports. If SVGs do not provide

sufficient opportunities for girls and women to play female characters, they may feel excluded from the games and be discouraged from playing altogether (Consalvo & Harper, 2009; Reinecke et al., 2007; Vermeulen et al., 2011).

Gendered character representations and player motivation

Female character representations have long remained significantly underrepresented in video games and are depicted in ways that reflect traditional gender norms and stereotypes (Bertozzi, 2008; Dill & Thill, 2007). The sexualisation of characters is especially frequent in male-oriented esports titles (Lynch et al., 2016), which often include portrayals of provocatively dressed female characters emphasising physical attributes (Downs & Smith, 2010; Jansz & Martis, 2007). For instance, the only option to play as female characters in the early SVGs was as female beach volleyball characters in pixelated bikinis (Brown, 2015). Despite an overall increase in female character options and a decrease in sexualised characters in games (Lynch et al., 2016), the results of this study reveal that female respondents tend to feel that most SVGs portray women poorly (Table 2c). This overall negative perception of female character portrayals in SVGs may lead to negative playing experiences for girls and women and discourage them from playing (Hartmann & Klimmt, 2006). It could also negatively influence players' impressions of real-life athletes that the female characters in SVGs are often meant to resemble (Darvin et al., 2021). Furthermore, stereotypical representations of women in games contribute to reinforcing the overall sexist nature of gaming and esports environments, foster negative impressions of women players and increase sexual harassments of women players (Darvin et al., 2020; Darvin et al., 2021; Dill et al., 2008; Hartmann & Klimmt, 2006). As a result, this overall negative perception of female characters in SVGs could be one potential reason why so few girls and women play them.

Therefore, positive and non-sexualised representations of female characters may be a key aspect in attracting more girls and women to engage in esports and could contribute towards

improving gender equity in esports environments (Lynch et al., 2016). This is supported by the study's findings, which show that most of the respondents believe that more girls and women would engage in SVGs if more female characters were included in them (see Table 5.2d). Although the potential of positive female representations to reduce social inequality and unequal power relations may vary depending on players' levels of identification with game characters (Shaw, 2015), video games are created in a culture in which sexualised representations of women are commonplace (Moulthrop, 2004). Therefore, it is not only SVG environments that would benefit from including representations reflecting a wider range of modes of being in the world, but also culture as a whole (Shaw, 2015).

Conclusion and Limitations

This study examines how representations of women as playable game characters in sports video games are perceived by players. The results reveal a clear gendered pattern, indicating that women have clearer and stronger opinions about female characters in SVGs than men. Although the number of female characters and their portrayals have developed in a positive direction in recent years, the participants feel that female character options remain too limited and that being able to play female characters is important to them. Moreover, female respondents tend to believe that SVGs portray women poorly and that more girls and women would engage in SVGs if more female characters were included. As a result, our findings reinforce the view that female character options are important to female players as game characters become sites that either enable or disallow them to take on certain identities (Shaw, 2015; Taylor, 2006). While the results are based on limited data related to SVG-based esports, the findings are consistent with previous research on gendered character options in gaming (Consalvo & Harper, 2009; De Jean et al., 1997; Darvin et al., 2021; Hartmann & Klimmt, 2006; Olsson, 2013; Reinecke et al., 2007; Vermeulen et al., 2011). Scarce and marginalised representations of women in video

games constitute an important part of a self-perpetuating cycle, in which girls and women are discouraged from participating in esports activities. Normalising female characters towards competent and non-objectified representations could reduce the gender disparities in esports environments (Lynch et al., 2016; Shen et al., 2016).

The present study has several limitations. When recruiting respondents online it is often more challenging to verify aspects related to the population, sample and location (Tjønndal & Fylling, 2021). Furthermore, this study focuses solely on players' perceptions of gender characters in SVGs, i.e. people who are already *engaged in* these games. Thus, the study has not considered the potential of gender equality in SVG play to recruit and include more women who do not play SVGs in the first place. However, it does contribute to the unpacking of gendered preferences concerning gendered character representations among players who already play SVGs. Furthermore, the study focuses on players' perceptions of gendered character representations in SVGs as a whole but does not consider the potential differences that may exist between various subgenres of SVGs. This is due to our limited data, which limits our possibility to look into distinct sub-genres of SVGs.

Moreover, the sample size ($N = 444$) on which our analyses are based is relatively small given the number of people engaged in esports globally. Therefore, the statistical power of the findings is weak, implying that they should be treated with caution (see Tjønndal, 2021). In addition, convenience sampling means that the results, including differences between male and female participants, are only generalisable to the sample analysed (Bornstein et al., 2013). Furthermore, convenience samples generally comprise a limited number of underrepresented sociodemographic sub-groups, such as ethnic minorities, resulting in inadequate power to identify variations in sociodemographic factors (Bornstein et al., 2013). Finally, another important limitation of this study is the use of non-validated items to quantitatively explore players' perceptions of gendered character representations, which may have influenced the

interpretation of the items. Our recommendation is that future research should focus on developing scales and items to measure preferences for game content and continue exploring the complexities of interactions between identification and players' experiences with game characters.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Information letter – Article IV

Appendix B⁷

Online survey – Article IV

Appendix C

NSD response – Article IV

⁷ See pages 242-243 for the questions used in Article IV.

Appendix A: Information letter to participants (Article IV)

Request for participation in research project

“Motivational factors among players and viewers of esports”

This is a question for you to participate in a research project where the purpose is to investigate what motivates people to play and watch esports. In this letter, we give you information about the aims of the study and what your participation will mean for you.

Purpose

The purpose of this project is to study how various motivational factors motivate different esports players and viewers in various ways. The questionnaire will be distributed on various online forums, both Norwegian and international, to explore if there are differences in motivational factors among various people. By illuminating differences in motivation between different groups of people, this study aims to be able to explain why certain demographic subgroups play and watch e-sports in different ways. This study is part of a larger doctoral research project at Nord University, Norway.

Who is responsible for this project?

Nord University is responsible for this project.

Why are you asked to participate?

Respondents to this survey are recruited through voluntary participation via various online esports related discussion forums, and everyone who wants to participate is welcome to do so. Anyone who has experience of playing games related to esports or watching other players compete against each other through e.g. streams or TV broadcasts are welcomed as respondents to this survey.

What does your participation entail?

If you choose to participate in the project, it entails that you fill out an online survey. This will take you approximately 10-15 minutes. The survey contains questions related to 13 different aspects of e-sports, such as competition, social cohesion and entertainment value, where the aim of these questions is to find out which aspects motivate you the most to spend time on esports. Your answers from the questionnaire will be registered electronically.

Participation is voluntary

It is voluntary to participate in the project. If you choose to participate, you can withdraw your consent at any time without giving any reason. All your personal information will then be deleted. It will not have any negative consequences for you if you do not want to participate or later choose to withdraw.

Your privacy - how we store and use your information

We will only use the information about you for the purposes we have described in this article. We treat the information confidentially and in accordance with the privacy regulations.

- Only the project manager at Nord University will have access to the data.
- The data material will be stored anonymously and externally through the University of Oslo's online software service.

All answers are anonymous, and participants will therefore not be recognized in the publication, and all data will be presented at group level.

What happens to your information when we end the research project?

The information is anonymized when the project is completed, which according to plan is by the end of April 2022. After the end of the project, any personal information will be deleted.

Personal rights

As long as you can be identified in the data material, you have the right to:

- Get access to what personal information is registered about you, and to receive a copy of the information
- To have personal information about you corrected
- To have personal information about you deleted
- To send a complaint to the Norwegian Data Protection Authority regarding the processing of your personal data

What gives us the right to process personal data about you?

We process information about you based on your consent.

The Norwegian Center for Research Data AS has assessed that the processing of personal data in this project is in accordance with national privacy regulations.

Additional information

If you have questions about the study, or want to use your rights described in this form, please contact:

- Nord University by project manager Egil Rogstad via mail: egil.rogstad@nord.no
- Nord University privacy representative: Toril Irene Kringen, mail: personvernombud@nord.no

If you have questions related to the Norwegian Center for Research Data's assessment of this project, you can contact:

- NSD – Norwegian Center for Research Data AS via mail (personverntjenester@nsd.no) or phone: +47 55 58 21 17.

Best regards,

Egil Rogstad
(Research project manager)

Declaration of consent

By navigating further from the first page of the survey, you agree to have received and understood information about the project, that you have had the opportunity to ask questions, and that your information is processed until the project is completed, May 2022.

Appendix B: Online survey (Article IV)

Motivations for playing and watching sports videogames

Side 1

Obligatoriske felter er merket med stjerne *

Information about this survey

The aim of this survey is to develop an understanding of what motivates people to play sports videogames and/or watch sports videogames through broadcasts on online video streaming platforms (e.g. Twitch.tv or YouTube). The target group of this study is anyone who has experience with playing and/or watching sports videogames. Here, the term sports videogames includes both games simulating real sports (e.g. FIFA, Madden, NBA 2K, NHL), racing games (e.g. F1, iRacing), and "hybrid" games that include only some elements of sports (e.g. Rocket League, Mario Kart, Mario Tennis, Super Smash Bros.).

We ask that you base your answers on the sports videogame that you play and/or watch most frequently. All answers are anonymous, and all results will be presented on group level. This survey is part of a PhD project at Nord University, Norway, that focuses on gender equality within esports. The survey is ethically approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data.

For any questions, please contact project manager Egil Rogstad at Nord University (mail: egil.rogstad@nord.no).

What is involved?

If you would like to take part in this study, we ask you to give your consent by completing a series of short online questions and click *Send* on the last page. Completing the survey should take no longer than 15 minutes.

 Sideskift

Side 2

Obligatoriske felter er merket med stjerne *

Background information

Age *

How old are you?

Gender *

- Female
- Male
- Other
- Prefer not to answer

Ethnicity *

- Caucasian
- Hispanic or Latino
- Black or African American
- Native American or American Indian
- Asian / Pacific Islander
- Other
- Prefer not to answer

Location *

Where is your home located?

Velg ...

Education *

What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed?

- Less than a high school diploma
- High school degree or equivalent
- Bachelor's degree (e.g. BA, BS)
- Master's degree (e.g. MA, MS, MEd)
- Doctorate (e.g. PhD, EdD)
- Other
- Prefer not to answer

Employment *

- Full-time
- Part-time
- Student
- Unemployed
- Retired
- Other
- Prefer not to answer



Side 3

Obligatoriske felter er merket med stjerne *

Favourite sports videogame title *

- FIFA (series)
- Pro Evolution Soccer (series)
- Madden (series)
- NBA 2K (series)
- NBA Live (series)
- NHL (series)
- MLB The Show (series)
- Rocket League
- iRacing
- rFactor (series)
- F1 (series)
- Assetto Corsa
- PGA Tour 2K21/The Golf Club (series)
- Super Smash Bros. (series)
- Mario Tennis Aces
- Mario Kart (series)
- Zwift
- Other

If other, please specify game title below

How often do you play sports videogames? *

- Never (less than once a year)
- Yearly (at least once a year)
- Monthly (at least once a month)
- Weekly (at least once a week)
- Daily

How often do you watch esports content related to sports videogames? *

e.g. esports leagues or competitions broadcasted on online streaming platforms or TV

- Never (less than once a year)
- Yearly (at least once a year)
- Monthly (at least once a month)
- Weekly (at least once a week)
- Daily

Do you have an income from playing sports videogames? *

- No
- Yes
- Prefer not to say

How would you classify your involvement in sports videogames? *

- Amateur/ pastime activity
- Semi-professional
- Professional

 Sideskift

Side 4

Obligatoriske felter er merket med stjerne *

Competitive nature

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Not relevant / prefer not to say
I enjoy the competitive gameplay of my favorite sports videogame *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I like the competitive nature of sports videogame competition *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It is great to see somebody do really well against other people *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I like to watch people taking it serious against one another *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I want to see high-level competition among players *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

 Sideskift

Side 5

Obligatoriske felter er merket med stjerne *

Social opportunities

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Not relevant / prefer not to say
I enjoy interacting with other fans online when watching my favorite sports videogame *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It allows me to meet other people online with similar interest to mine *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It provides an online social outlet when watching/playing my favorite sports videogame *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I can connect with other sports videogame fans and be part of the online community *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I enjoy interacting with streamers online and getting to know them *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I can interact with other spectators online and get a sense of camaraderie *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



Side 6

Obligatoriske felter er merket med stjerne *

Skill improvement

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Not relevant / prefer not to say
Watching my favorite sports videogame helps me become a better player *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I get to learn something new from some of the best players *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Watching my favorite sports videogame would give me a better idea on how to win the game if I play *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I can improve my game by looking at the techniques and strategies used by the experts *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It gives me a deeper understanding of what's possible when I play *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It improves my own play by getting ideas from professional players *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

 Sideskift

Side 7

Obligatoriske felter er merket med stjerne *

Friendship

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Not relevant / prefer not to say
Watching/playing a sports videogame gives me a chance to bond with my friends *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I enjoy sharing the experience of watching/playing my favorite sports videogame with friends *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I can have a good time with friends while watching/playing my favorite sports videogame *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Watching/playing sports videogames creates bonding moments that people can carry with them *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I enjoy watching/playing sports videogames with friends in a social setting *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

 Sideskift

Side 8

Obligatoriske felter er merket med stjerne *

Game knowledge

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Not relevant / prefer not to say
I feel my understanding of the sports videogame adds to my enjoyment of watching it *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I watch/play because I understand the intricacies and strategies *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I watch/play because I understand what is going on in the game *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I like watching/playing my favorite sports videogame because I know the ins and out of it *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

 Sideskift

Side 9

Obligatoriske felter er merket med stjerne *

Skill appreciation

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Not relevant / prefer not to say
I like watching how others can do things in the game that I could never imagine *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I watch players go to their limits and show moves that I could not typically think of *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I like to see new moves, tricks, or techniques during a game *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I enjoy high micro/macro skills that only the best can play during a game *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

 Sideskift

Side 10

Obligatoriske felter er merket med stjerne *

Entertainment

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Not relevant / prefer not to say
I watch/play my favorite sports videogame because it is fun to watch/play *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I watch/play my favorite sports videogame because I want to have fun *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I watch/play my favorite sports videogame because it is enjoyable to watch/play *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It is a lot of fun to watch/play my favorite sports videogame *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Watching/playing my favorite sports videogame is something fun to pass time *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



Obligatoriske felter er merket med stjerne *

Drama

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	So-mewhat disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	So-mewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Not relevant / prefer not to say
I enjoy the moment in a game when people make a strong comeback *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I enjoy watching underdogs make big breaks and upset the better ones *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I like the fact that a game can be turned around in the very last minute *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

☰ Sideskift

Side 12

Obligatoriske felter er merket med stjerne *

Competition excitement

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	So-mewhat disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	So-mewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Not relevant / prefer not to say
I like the excitement associated with watching my favorite sports videogame *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I find watching/playing my favorite sports videogame very exciting *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I enjoy the thrill and excitement when I watch/play my favorite sports videogame *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel hyped and excited when I watch/play my favorite sports videogame *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

 Sideskift

Side 13

Obligatoriske felter er merket med stjerne *

Feeling of being present

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	So-mewhat disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	So-mewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Not relevant / prefer not to say
I feel like I am in the game when it is close or coming down to the final moments *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I can experience how professionals play without actually investing the hours into it *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I can get a feeling of playing at a high level without actually being good at it *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

 Sideskift

Side 14

Obligatoriske felter er merket med stjerne *

Influence from others

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	So-mewhat disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	So-mewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Not relevant / prefer not to say
Knowing many others watch/play sports videogames makes me watch/play more *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel I need to watch/play sports videogames because others watch/play *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My friends force me to watch/play sports videogames *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

 Sideskift

Side 15

Obligatoriske felter er merket med stjerne *

Fanship

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	So-mewhat disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	So-mewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Not relevant / prefer not to say
I am a huge fan of sports videogames in general *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am a big fan of my favorite team in sports videogames *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Seeing my favorite sports videogame team win is important to me *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I like any video game related to my favorite sport *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To continue to enjoy the sports I like, I also watch/play sports videogames *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

 Sideskift

Side 16

Obligatoriske felter er merket med stjerne *

Gender of game characters

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	So-mewhat disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	So-mewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Not relevant / prefer not to say
I enjoy playing with male game characters *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I enjoy playing with female game characters *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Having the ability to play with female characters/teams is important to me *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

I enjoy playing with gender-neutral characters *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I enjoy playing with customizable characters *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I enjoy playing in-game competitions based on male clubs and teams *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I enjoy playing in-game competitions based on female clubs and teams *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Being able to play with characters of the same gender as myself is important to me *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel that there are too few female characters in sports videogames *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I believe most sports video games portray women poorly *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I believe it is problematic that the number of female characters in many sports videogames are limited *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would like sports videogames to include more female and gender-mixed teams and competitions *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I believe more girls and women would engage in sports videogames if there were more female characters in the games *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

[Se nylige endringer i Nettskjema](#)



Obligatoriske felter er merket med stjerne *

Intention of watching sports videogames in the future

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	So-mewhat disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	So-mewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Not relevant / prefer not to say
I predict that I will keep watching sports videogame streams in the future at least as much as I have watched lately *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I intend to watch sports videogame streams at least as often within the next month as I have previously watched *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I plan to watch sports videogame streams during the next month *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

 Sideskift

Side 18

Obligatoriske felter er merket med stjerne *

Intention of playing sports videogames in the future

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	So-mewhat disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	So-mewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Not relevant / prefer not to say
I predict that I will keep playing sports videogame(s) in the future at least as much as I have played lately *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I intend to play sports videogame(s) at least as much within the next month as I have previously played *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I plan to play sports videogame(s) during the next month *	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Appendix C: NSD response (Article IV)

NSD NORSK SENTER FOR FORSKNINGSDATA

Vurdering

Referansenummer

195665

Prosjekttittel

Kjønn i e-sport

Behandlingsansvarlig institusjon

Nord Universitet / Fakultet for samfunnsvitenskap / Historie, kultur og medier

Prosjektansvarlig (vitenskapelig ansatt/veileder eller stipendiat)

Egil Trasti Rogstad, egil.rogstad@nord.no, tlf: 97665231

Type prosjekt

Forskerprosjekt

Prosjektperiode

01.12.2020 - 01.05.2022

Vurdering (2)

15.01.2021 - Vurdert

NSD har vurdert endringen.

Det er vår vurdering at behandlingen av personopplysninger i prosjektet vil være i samsvar med personvernlovgivningen så fremt den gjennomføres i tråd med det som er dokumentert i meldeskjemaet med vedlegg den 15.01.2021. Behandlingen kan fortsette.

OPPFØLGING AV PROSJEKTET

NSD vil følge opp ved planlagt avslutning for å avklare om behandlingen av personopplysningene er avsluttet.

Lykke til med prosjektet!

Kontaktperson hos NSD: Elizabeth Blomstervik
Tlf. Personverntjenester: 55 58 21 17 (tast 1)

02.12.2020 - Vurdert

Det er vår vurdering at behandlingen av personopplysninger i prosjektet vil være i samsvar med personvernlovgivningen så fremt den gjennomføres i tråd med det som er dokumentert i meldeskjemaet 02.12.2020 med vedlegg, samt i meldingsdialogen mellom innmelder og NSD. Behandlingen kan starte.

MELD VESENTLIGE ENDRINGER

Dersom det skjer vesentlige endringer i behandlingen av personopplysninger, kan det være nødvendig å melde dette til NSD ved å oppdatere meldeskjemaet. Før du melder inn en endring, oppfordrer vi deg til å lese om hvilke type endringer det er nødvendig å melde:

https://nsd.no/personvernombud/meld_prosjekt/meld_endringer.html

Du må vente på svar fra NSD før endringen gjennomføres.

TYPE OPPLYSNINGER OG VARIGHET

Prosjektet vil behandle særlige kategorier av personopplysninger om etnisitet og alminnelige kategorier av personopplysninger frem til 01.05.2022.

LOVLIG GRUNNLAG

Prosjektet vil innhente samtykke fra de registrerte til behandlingen av personopplysninger. Vår vurdering er at prosjektet legger opp til et samtykke i samsvar med kravene i art. 4 nr. 11 og art. 7, ved at det er en frivillig, spesifikk, informert og utvetydig bekreftelse, som kan dokumenteres, og som den registrerte kan trekke tilbake.

Lovlig grunnlag for behandlingen vil dermed være den registrertes uttrykkelige samtykke, jf. personvernforordningen art. 6 nr. 1 bokstav a, jf. art. 9 nr. 2 bokstav a, jf. personopplysningsloven § 10, jf. § 9 (2).

PERSONVERNPRINSIPPER

NSD vurderer at den planlagte behandlingen av personopplysninger vil følge prinsippene i personvernforordningen om:

- lovlighet, rettferdighet og åpenhet (art. 5.1 a), ved at de registrerte får tilfredsstillende informasjon og samtykker til behandlingen
- formålsbegrensning (art. 5.1 b), ved at personopplysninger samles inn for spesifikke, uttrykkelig angitte og berettigede formål, og ikke viderebehandles til nye uforenlige formål
- dataminimering (art. 5.1 c), ved at det kun behandles opplysninger som er adekvate, relevante og nødvendige for formålet med prosjektet
- lagringsbegrensning (art. 5.1 e), ved at personopplysningene ikke lagres lengre enn nødvendig for å oppfylle formålet

DE REGISTRERTES RETTIGHETER

Så lenge de registrerte kan identifiseres i datamaterialet vil de ha følgende rettigheter: åpenhet (art. 12), informasjon (art. 13), innsyn (art. 15), retting (art. 16), sletting (art. 17), begrensning (art. 18), underretning (art. 19), dataportabilitet (art. 20).

NSD vurderer at informasjonen som de registrerte vil motta oppfyller lovens krav til form og innhold, jf. art. 12.1 og art. 13.

Vi minner om at hvis en registrert tar kontakt om sine rettigheter, har behandlingsansvarlig institusjon plikt til å svare innen en måned.

FØLG DIN INSTITUSJONS RETNINGSLINJER

NSD legger til grunn at behandlingen oppfyller kravene i personvernforordningen om riktighet (art. 5.1 d), integritet og konfidensialitet (art. 5.1. f) og sikkerhet (art. 32).

TSD er databehandler i prosjektet. NSD legger til grunn at behandlingen oppfyller kravene til bruk av databehandler, jf. art 28 og 29.

For å forsikre dere om at kravene oppfylles, må dere følge interne retningslinjer og eventuelt rådføre dere med behandlingsansvarlig institusjon.

OPPFØLGING AV PROSJEKTET

NSD vil følge opp ved planlagt avslutning for å avklare om behandlingen av personopplysningene er avsluttet.

Lykke til med prosjektet!

Kontaktperson hos NSD: Elizabeth Blomstervik
Tlf. Personverntjenester: 55 58 21 17 (tast 1)

This thesis focuses on gendered power relations and inequality in sports-themed esports (esports based on sports simulation games). Due to the continuing merging of sports-themed esports and traditional sports, the esports industry's deeply rooted issues concerning a significant underrepresentation of women, sexist stereotypes and harassment constitute a major challenge. The aim of the thesis is to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex issues and challenges that women players face within sports-themed esports. The following main research question is posed: How do gendered power relations influence gender inequality in sports-themed esports?

This research question is addressed by means of four separate studies, each with their own research questions and methodological approaches. Article I is based on a traditional narrative review that presents the current research on gender and esports. In Article II, a document analysis is used to examine the gendered challenges and opportunities relating to the IOC's strategy to include esports in the Olympic Games. Article III is based on a Foucauldian discourse analysis and examines how the media constructed Chiquita Evans when she became the first woman player in the NBA 2K League. Article IV draws on an online survey of sports video game players to examine their perceptions of gendered character representations in these games.

Although esports is regarded as a non-physical form of sport in which men have no physical competitive advantage over women, the findings in the thesis further demonstrate how sports-themed esports participation involves additional challenges for women players. As a result, the traditional dynamics of male domination in sports seem inescapable, even in the virtual space of sports-themed esports.