

**The Hateful Side of Electronic Sports: Sexism, Misogyny and Transphobia in a “Man’s  
Space”**

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## **Abstract**

Electronic sports (esports) has been a rapidly growing industry. Individuals have been increasingly interested in playing multiplayer and competitive video games as well as watching the best players compete against each other in various esports titles. The industry itself has many issues such as an alleged pay gap, a ton of alleged exploitation, rampant sexism, discrimination, and transphobia. This project will focus on discrimination in esports, particularly sexism, misogyny, and transphobia. Anti-LGBTQ+ opinions and specifically transphobic views have seen a recent rise in public discourse in North America which has influenced transphobic policy to be implemented within sports like chess. My interest in pursuing this research project stemmed from my experiences as a former salaried player in “Counter-Strike” (CS) where discrimination was common. This research project will address these topics using semi-structured interviews with ten esports competitors that identify as women who have a competitive experience in esports. Their experiences will be important to contribute to a big gap in esports literature which is mostly filled with quantitative research mostly in the form of content analysis. This research project is pursued by Kwantlen Polytechnic University student Filip Mitevski and the project supervisor is Dr. Petra Jonas.

## **Key Words**

Sexism, sexist, misogyny, transphobia, hatred, hate, bigotry, electronic sports, esports, feminism, feminist theory, queer theory, counter-strike, cs, valorant, manosphere, barriers to entry, barriers, video games, online, anonymity, intersectionality

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### **Thesis Committee:**

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## Introduction

Hatred has been on the rise once again in North America, especially in Canada, as people find it increasingly more difficult to afford to live in the middle of a housing, affordability, and inflation crises that worsen every day (Al Mallees, 2023). People that have become more stressed due to the reality of their economic situation blame other groups of people that are different in character than themselves as a way to explain why their own lives are getting tougher. Some forms of hatred that recently resurfaced in Canada are misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia, with an alarming amount of anti-LGBTQ+ protests taking place around most major Canadian cities just this September (“Cross-country rallies,” 2023). While counter-protesters showed up alongside them, the fact that they happened in Canada should be alarming to all of us, even among those that identify as straight and cisgender.

This type of hatred has been around for an incredibly long time, and has always been there in certain topics such as sports. Misogyny and transphobia have been the “default” position among men in many sports ever since their existence. Most sports have historically been considered “made by and for men” which excluded and prohibited women from them (Howe, 2022, p. 456). Formula 1 is one of the very few examples that have recently attempted to be a unisex sport, though due to historical discrimination, it has only seen a few women drivers successfully compete in it (Howe, 2022, p. 455). Sexism and transphobia in many sports has become so ingrained in many people that they do not even attempt to challenge this outdated view, and many simply accept it. Many would understand the need for a separate women’s and men’s competition in many sports, where person’s physical characteristics make a massive difference in how they could “fairly” compete, which is how separate women’s only leagues had recently emerged in many sports like Formula 1 and equestrianism (Howe, 2022, p. 456). Esports

has a unique promise of gender equity that has never materialized within traditional sports, where physical differences do not matter. The skill differences required to succeed in esports require no segregation based on sex (Holden et al., 2020, p. 3). From traditional sports, chess should be considered by most as one of the few sports that are like esports in this aspect, yet the International Chess Federation (FIDE) banned transgender women from participating in women's competitions (Kim, 2023).

Chess may be the sport that is closest to electronic sports (esports) where a competitor's physical ability should not matter in competition. This decision by FIDE should be horrifying for fans of esports that strive to finally have a competitive sport which has true equality for every competitor regardless of their gender, sexual orientation, or race. Similarly to traditional sports, esports has historically struggled with gender inequality and the industry has attempted to undo it via introducing women's only competitions and tournaments too (McLeod et al., 2021, p. 1283). While there may have been some marginal progress in esports in correcting the roots of historical gender inequality in the field, there is still a ton of work to do.

Reflexivity will be crucial in addressing my positionality in this research topic along with what my lived experiences have led me to know or believe when it comes to issues related to the topic that I am studying. Personal experiences and biases will constantly be addressed, because I am in a position of privilege wanting to research a vulnerable population. In my several years of competing at the top regional level in North America in a popular esports title called "Counter Strike: Global Offensive" (CSGO), I have noticed that sexism, misogyny, and transphobia are rampant in the field, and people unfamiliar with the competitive aspect video games have no idea of just how commonplace it is. It will be important to acknowledge my own position as a straight cisgender man of European origin researching a population of people that identify as cisgender

or transgender women, LGBTQ+ women, or women of colour. These previous lived experiences that I have from playing in ranked games alongside my closest friend of seven years who identifies as an LGBTQ+ woman have exposed me to a world that I would otherwise likely be blind to. Male players send tons of sexist, transphobic, and misogynist hate to women simply because they perceive them as women who play a video game. Transgender women seemingly experience it the most out of all women, with people sharing their experiences on platforms such as “X” (Twitter) daily (Thaena, 2023). There have been countless amount of times where I have overheard other male competitors state that they would “never scrim (practice) against women,” “never play with a woman,” or that “all women are bad at the game,” simply because of their gender identity. While competitors, both semi-professional and professional, are aware that this phenomenon is present and commonplace, it is not one that they openly talk about in order to not “ruin” the scene that gives them meaning or pays them a living. These vast re-occurring experiences from my three years playing as a salaried competitor and several more as an unpaid one along with personally identifying as a feminist since I was a teenager were the origins of the research idea behind this project. The connections I have formed from my playing days would help research a specific population that is otherwise barely researched in the field of esports. That population would particularly be professional or competitive women and what their experiences are like, as their higher popularity arguably leads to them to be harassed at higher levels than the average woman who casually enjoys playing video games. My personal lived experiences and my understanding of the issues that have developed through them which have firmly influenced my values will lead me to have a constructivist paradigm as a researcher within this project.



Current research out there on the topics of misogyny or transphobia in esports is minimal, and it mostly focuses on content analysis or the over-sexualization of women characters in video games. Video games and esports are not the exact same, as esports specifically means the ultra-competitive, sports-side of video games, while the video games that research of this nature generally focus on are strictly just on the casual aspect of the content produced by game developers. It is important to at least address its existence, and there is a possibility to make a connection of how said over-sexualization of women characters by game developers may lead to women being treated differently in video games and in the esports industry. Research has shown that transgender people feel re-assured that they too can have fulfilling and successful lives when they encounter visible transgender characters in video games that are portrayed as such (Herriot & Fry, 2021, p. 15). It is important to understand that characters in video games usually abide by socially constructed cisgendered and heteronormative ideals of what they should look like (Herriot & Fry, 2021, p. 15), and this could play a significant role in how some people that play video games view themselves and how others treat them. Women of all backgrounds and identities come together and create safe spaces for each other in order to combat online hate (Poland, 2016, p. 160). Research that has particularly focused on how LGBTQ+ teenagers attempt to feel safer in online spaces show that they have more supportive friendships and safe, supportive places online which is important for coping, catharsis, or learning how to deal with the problem of online victimization (Ybarra et al., 2015, p. 134). Transgender women have been visibly competing in esports for at least about a decade now, with there being about five competitors that have enjoyed regional or global success across several esports titles. One of those competitors was a player known as Maria “Remilia” Creveling who sadly passed away in her sleep in 2019 (Wolf, 2019). During her competing days, she notably cut her career very short

due to constant everyday harassment, which is depressingly a big issue for women in esports and likely the biggest reason behind the alarmingly low participation rate of women competitors in the field (Holden et al., 2020, p. 12). Research has shown that sex and gender harassment is so prevalent in esports that exceptionally talented women regularly stop pursuing their passion altogether (Holden et al., 2020, p.3). In traditional sports, athletes that identify as transgender are discriminated at a greater level than those that are gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Cunningham & Pickett, 2018, p. 220), which is incredibly likely to be the true for esports as well. Many other key concepts that this study will cover are equality, sexism, harassment, misogyny, transphobia, homophobia, feminism, discrimination, barriers to entry, and more.

One of the biggest reasons as to why there are only about five competitors that have seen any form of success in esports is mainly due to sexism, where women particularly struggle to prove their skill level and are simply excluded from the industry altogether (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018, p. 299). The underlying prevalent stereotype is that women are not as skilled as men (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018, p. 299). Content analysis in research that has focused on how women streamers get treated compared to men streamers has shown that women streamers are almost twice as likely to receive sexist comments when compared to men (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018, p. 305). “Streamers” are individuals that stream their gameplay to the world on platforms such as Twitch or YouTube, which is normally accompanied by a webcam that shows their face, body, and live reactions to their own gameplay. It would not be difficult for anyone to simply tune in to a woman competitor’s stream to find any sexist or hateful comments from viewers, and this hate is even more common among forums that discuss competitive matches and tournaments that took place. Online hate in the form of misogyny and transphobia is so prevalent that women try their

best to avoid bringing more attention to themselves because they understand it would simply attract more negativity.

The online world is a place notorious for replicating misogynist and transphobic sentiment making it impossible to differentiate between online and offline harassment experienced by women (Poland, 2016). Spaces exclusive to men that are filled with extreme misogyny are commonplace among communities such as “Men Going Their Own Way” (MGTOW), “Men’s Rights Activists” (MRAs) whose ideas are often echoed among other cisgendered men who spend too much time online (Bates, 2021). Writing from anecdotal personal experiences, these ideas are sadly not uncommon among cisgender men that compete in esports, especially among those that personally feel like they are “oppressed” by feminism in gaming (and the world). Some research backs up this anecdotal experience, where findings show that undesirable behaviour online is common and online harassment is a pervasive issue in the gaming community (Tang & Fox, 2016, p. 513). For these reasons, the most important theoretical approach that this study will use is feminist theory. Women’s experiences have historically been downplayed and underrepresented in all aspects of life, and that is still the reality of their experiences in esports. Not only do women face many barriers to enter the scene, a lot of discrimination on the basis of their gender or sexual identity, and daily threats to them simply because they “threaten” men in video games by being incredibly talented competitors, their experiences are not researched or talked about enough. Gender and queer theory will be used especially when researching issues that LGBTQ+ women that compete experience in this space too. Critical race theory may also be used depending on the individuals that would end up being researched and interviewed in this study. It should be noted that the shockingly low amount of women of colour could be attributed to all of the hate and abuse women in general

receive in esports which leads to their lower participation in the field (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018, p. 300), and women of colour would arguably receive even more abuse due to their ethnic background.

This research will contribute to a particular gap in literature where the experiences of women that compete in esports are not covered enough. Prior research on any individuals that fit these criteria is incredibly rare and they are often just content analysis by researchers that understand and explain sociological explanations around why misogyny and transphobia exists in the field along with how they may affect women that compete. In-depth interviews with women that have experienced a career in esports which cover these problematic issues within the scene are virtually non-existent or extraordinarily rare, which is the primary focus of this project. There is at least notable coverage in online media on this issue and how women are held back and discriminated against in esports due to their gender, especially when reputable individuals report on this “open secret” (Gan, 2023). This is one of the several research goals of this project, which is to bring more attention to the discrimination that women face in esports. It will also strive to give cisgender, transgender, and women of colour an opportunity that they deserve to share their lived experiences. The general research question that this project will answer is: “How do women in esports get discriminated against on the basis of their perceived gender or sexual orientation?” Sub-research questions that would follow may be narrower in answering questions that relate to other sub-topics related to the general question. Some examples would include: “What are women’s experiences like in esports?”, “What kind of precautions do women in esports take in order to deal with less discrimination?”, and “Have you experienced barriers to entry in the scene because of your gender or sexual orientation?”.

The theoretical framework that this research paper will use to construct knowledge will be based on perspectives based on feminist, queer, and critical race theory. The framework will mostly rely on feminist and queer theory which are the most appropriate and applicable for the research questions and goals of this project. This theory will influence the research questions as well as identify key concepts and definitions relevant to the topic of this project (Grant & Osanloo, 2014, p. 13) which is electronic sports (esports).

Research questions that this project will analyze and answer will be influenced by its theoretical framework. All of them would utilize feminist, queer, and critical race theory to identify specific goals of this qualitative research. Theory that this research project will help explain certain phenomena and relationships between participants involved in this research and their experiences (Grant & Osanloo, 2014, p. 13) in esports.

Defining terms that will be commonly used throughout this project such as what exactly is defined and understood by this project as feminism, misogyny, sexism, transphobia, online harassment, and so on, will be vital to understand and define both the positioning and the theoretical framework of this project.

## Literature Review

The major theme of this research project is “discrimination towards women in electronic sports”. “Discrimination” in this project will primarily consist of sexism, misogyny, and transphobia. Racism and homophobia will also be looked at through some literature and intersectionality will be applied when possible, depending on the characteristics of future participants of this study. The definition this research project will provide for the term “electronic sports” (esports) would be the same as defined in previous literature which is “an umbrella term for organized and competitive video gaming” (Holden et al., 2020, p.5).

This literature review will first look at how these forms of discrimination exist within a broader context. It will then look at how they exist in online spaces and traditional and electronic sports (esports). Previous scholarly research, studies, and books will be covered to get a wider sense of how discrimination exists in all these spaces and how it affects people it impacts.

Almost all information, theories, concepts, findings, and discourses will be drawn from sources that apply mostly feminist and queer theories while also including some literature that has critical race theory. Feminist and queer theories are critical to this research project as the participants that this research project will study are individuals whose life experiences will be best understood using them. It will be important to begin with a broader understanding of what theories and other previous knowledge exist in feminist and queer literature that may be applied to esports before narrowing down and defining the scope of this research project at the end of the literature review.

There is no one universal way to define what “feminism” or “feminist” means, as evident throughout most sources in this literature review such as Tong’s *Feminist Thought: A*

*Comprehensive Introduction*, Siegel's *A Mixed-Methods Examination of Modern Feminist Identity*, and O. Alichie's *'You don't talk like a woman': the influence of gender identity in the constructions of online misogyny*. People seemingly define some terms for themselves differently based on their lived experiences and perceived position in society. This research project will define what "feminism" means most closely what O. Alichie has written, which is that it is an ideology "aimed at defining, establishing, and defending equal opportunities for women in all spheres of life" (O. Alichie, 2023, p. 1417). The author further explains that feminist identity continues to be fluid as there is growing suppression and scathing reactions that continue to exist in most patriarchal contexts (O. Alichie, 2023, p. 1417). This observation can be seen echoed in other literature that discuss forms of discrimination in patriarchal societies across different societal contexts.

In two of Laura Bates's books, named *Men Who Hate Women: The Truth about Extreme Misogyny and How It Affects Us All* and *Fix The System, Not The Women*, the main topic is how sexism, misogyny, and hatred exist in patriarchal societies today. The books focus on different societal contexts, where *Men Who Hate Women* focuses on the overlap of modern misogynist and white supremacist rhetoric that is found in fringe online spaces which the author deems a "modern terrorist movement" (Bates, 2021). This book is the most up-to-date and relevant source on current extreme misogyny and hatred that exists in online spaces. Laura's other book primarily focuses on how the patriarchy affects and holds back women in everyday interactions between people. She has done content analysis on how media negatively affects the perception women have of their own body due to how bodies are portrayed in advertising, news, and other media sources (Bates, 2023). Notably, she has cited important data to back up her points as to

how the patriarchy negatively affects women in the workplace, which will be applicable to this project as esports is the workplace for the participants that will be involved in this project.

The way the author defines “patriarchy” is almost identical to what this research project would define it as. She defines the term as “a historical system that has been designed by and those who have always held the most power in our society: white, wealthy, non-disabled men” (Bates, 2023, p. 38). This research project would add “cisgender” to its understanding of this term. Bates then cites British and North American sources which point to how women are conditioned by a patriarchal society to perceive themselves as lesser than men. She makes this argument citing examples of what women have said to excuse these discrepancies while then showing these alarming figures alongside real-life examples. The examples of data that she uses include how men are 23 percent more likely to ask for a pay raise, women are less likely to apply for jobs they don’t fit the full criteria of, nearly two-thirds of women in tech say their ideas are ignored until a man repeats them, and how British women perform 60 percent more unpaid work than men (Bates, 2023, p. 34). One U.S. study that Bates mentions will be important and will influence some theory in this research project which is data that shows that women consistently rated their performance lower than men even when they perform equally (Bates, 2023, p. 35). This research project will be interested in finding out whether this phenomenon is true in esports, and how women that compete in this field may explain it if they view it as relevant.

The argument Bates makes when bringing up all these examples is that these discrepancies are so normalized that they are completely accepted in our societies. Women are so used to hearing that it is their fault for these issues that they stop fighting them, thinking it is how things are (Bates, 2023, p. 35), when it is the patriarchy that collectively discriminates against



them rather than discrepancies being individual faults. Bates argues that women have been conditioned by society to ignore their problems and instead society belittles women's experiences of sexism, discrimination, and abuse (Bates, 2023, p. 37).

One other applicable concept found in *Fix The System, Not The Women* is when the author brings up an example of "toxic masculinity" in the British police force. She explains that "toxic masculinity" within the police leads to a fetishization of black women (Bates, 2023, p. 137). The term "toxic masculinity" will be important to understand and examine in this research project as it may lead to several findings and interpretations of data that will result from future interviews. This project deems "toxic masculinity" to be a vital and instrumental part of misogyny, sexism, transphobia, homophobia, and racism that likely exist in the world of esports.

An interesting pattern that was found in literature outside of traditional and electronic sports was that the theme of systemic barriers was almost exclusively found in literature that was influenced by queer theory. An overwhelming majority of previous literature that only focused on feminist theory did not cover systemic barriers that women may face, or at least they never explicitly bring up the term. Laura Bates mentions systemic barriers in *Fix The System, Not The Women*, and Siegel's long doctorate thesis brings up barriers in feminism and for feminists multiple times in their work. Interestingly, all literature that is based on queer theory which covers LGBTQ+, especially transgender issues in society, mentions some form of systemic barrier that people face. Attempting to analyze and interpret potential barriers that prevent cisgender and transgender women from competing in esports is one of the main research questions of this project. Transgender women obviously exist in esports too and some of them have enjoyed notable success at the global or top regional level. The most marginalized groups

online tend to get discriminated against the most and in esports that would usually mean individuals that stray from heteronormative social constructs of gender and sexuality. To deal with this problem in online spaces, research has shown that LGBTQ+ teenagers attempt to create their own safe spaces with like-minded friends that support each other to cope and deal with online victimization (Ybarra et al., 2015, p. 134). This project may attempt to find data that may support or disprove this point in the world of esports.

Previous literature brings up issues such as barriers to legally changing one's name and gender marker in higher education (Siegel, 2019, p. 4). An article brings up barriers to gender-affirming care and medical transitioning (Pellicane & Ciesla, 2022, p. 2). One study that focuses on self-management of mental health discusses perceived barriers when covering the "minority stress model" among LGBTQ+ youth (Town et al., 2021). Another study similarly uses the same model and discusses barriers that LGBTQ+ attempt to overcome in society (Ybarra et al., 2015, p. 131). The same research ties this model to the "minority stress theory" which posits that transgender individuals experience depression at higher rates due to internal and external stressors related to their identity (Pellicane & Ciesla, 2022, p. 1). This research project will certainly focus on barriers that transgender women face in esports, while it will also attempt to potentially fill a gap where barriers that cisgender women face are not adequately covered. There are likely various forms of barriers that deter cisgender and transgender women from considering esports as a career, and my current established understanding of reality prior to pursuing interviews with this project is that discrimination of all kinds and hatred online and in competitive video games likely plays a part in women being greatly underrepresented in esports. This research paper may try to understand whether black women in esports are greatly underrepresented compared to the percentage of the population they make up in real life. This

may seem true anecdotally, and it may be a point to come back to once this project reaches the stage of analyzing and interpreting data.

The barriers for women in traditional sports, in this case Formula 1, covered in previous literature could be applicable for barriers that women deal with in esports. This research project will attempt to understand and analyze potential barriers for women when interviewing participants on their experiences, and the barriers brought up in previous research in Formula 1 will greatly influence this project's knowledge of this subtheme prior to partaking in research. Barriers discussed in previous literature were broken down into five different categories for women in Formula 1, and they were: 1) historical and current attitudes, 2) assumed physical and mental inferiority, 3) sexualization, 4) money, and 5) representation or (in)visibility, which ultimately prevent women from participating in the sport (Howe, 2022 p. 455). When researching these different barriers for women in Formula 1, the author notes a woman driver participating in the sport was seen as a "political statement" and that historical attitudes excluded and prohibited women from competing in sports based on "medical misinformation" and "gatekeeping" (Howe, 2022, p. 456). The researcher dismisses sex-based differences which is not applicable for every competitor simply due to their perceived gender, and makes a point that driving differences between men and women in Formula 1 is not biological but due to different life experiences (Howe, 2022, p. 458). Notably, women face hostility and neglect when engaging in masculine sports and they have been denied opportunities that they would have had if they were men (Howe, 2022, p. 458). The third barrier mentioned in this literature is sexualization and how women in Formula 1 must overcome and endure it in order to become drivers (Howe, 2022, p. 459). In previous instances, a driver has been advised not to have pink on her car so that she could be taken more seriously, and the most successful woman in the sport

has been referred to as “perhaps the most hypersexualized female athlete in the current era” (Howe, 2022, p. 459-460). In Formula 1, similar to the wage gap issue in the workplace outside of sports, women get way less money and sponsorships to compete than men (Howe, 2022, p. 461) which is strongly arguable that it further prevents women from competing due to the inability to meet the financial needs of the support (Howe, 2022, p. 460). The issue of lack of funding and sponsorships exists as a barrier in esports too from anecdotal experience. The author explains the last barrier in Formula 1 of representation by pointing out that participation levels of women are fewer than men across all elite level sports (Howe, 2022, p. 461). Not only are there few women, but there are also even fewer women (and men) of colour involved in this sport (Howe, 2022, p. 461), which is very likely the case in esports too. It is possible that systemic racism is a big factor behind this fact. Cultural norms surrounding women pursuing sports may be a leading factor behind the lack of their representation (Howe, 2022, p. 461) which considering that much literature explains online video games as a “man’s space”, it may be an explanation for the lack of representation of women in esports too. This research makes a point that striving for a higher representation of women at the top of any profession will inspire others and combat harmful stereotypes via a result known as the “role model effect” (Howe, 2022, p. 461).

When it comes to just research methods in the literature, most of the literature falls under the category of quantitative research. Content analysis seems to be widely popular among previous works that make up feminist and queer theory. Surveys with questionnaires attempting to explain certain observations or theory among certain populations also seem to be frequently used. Qualitative research could be found in about 20 percent of the literature. This has nothing to do with the relevancy of their findings, however. Notably, one qualitative research which

examined feminist issues detailed how their approach to their research was always influenced. One example to point out would be when the author stated that they used a constructivist grounded theory approach to understand “feminist-identifying women and gender diverse people’s experiences in the present cultural context” (Siegel, 2021, p. 33). Their reasoning seems relevant to this research paper. There is a high likelihood that this approach would make up the theoretical framework that will influence my interpretation of data that I collect during this project.

One theory that is discussed or brought up to explain certain issues in literature is “social dominance orientation (SDO)”. Siegel mentions it to explain that women who recognize the importance of an intersectionality subscribe less to this theory (Siegel, 2021, p. 6). One study that is wholly based around this orientation and examines how it causes gender minority stigma defines it as a “preference for hierarchical power structures in society (Puckett et al., 2020, p. 1083). Their findings suggest that SDO is associated with higher levels of gender minority stigma” (Puckett et al., 2020, p. 1081) and trait aggression (Puckett et al., 2020, p. 1088). The author explains that SDO is associated with a variety of prejudices, “including those based on race, sex, and sexual orientation”, with previous research showing that individuals with high SDO display prejudice towards less affirming behaviours such as lesbians and gay men (Puckett et al., 2020, p. 1083). SDO will be something that this research project will cover in analyzing and interpreting certain data and findings, as it may prove to be a very relevant explanation behind certain problems within esports. One predictor of harassment and sexism in online video games brought up in Tang & Fox’s article is SDO which reflects individual’s endorsement of inequality among social groups thus resulting in prejudice (2016, p. 515). Their research based on men’s harassment behaviour in online video games shows that online harassment has become

a pervasive issue within the community (Tang & Fox, 2016, p. 513). Through this study, the authors have determined that there are two types of online aggression in video games, those being general harassment which insults players in-game skill similar to taunting in traditional sports and sexual harassment (Tang & Fox, 2016, p. 513) which this literature review will focus on. The study argues that anonymity for most players may worsen stereotypes and expectations as to who “belongs” in video games and who does not (Tang & Fox, 2016, p. 513). It further explains that previous research shows that online games can be a hostile environment for players, much being common trash talk like in traditional sports, but commonly targeted harassment towards those that are seen as “not belonging” (Tang & Fox, 2016, p. 513). In video games and in esports, women are seen as outsiders and thus become targeted for harassment (Tang & Fox, 2016, p. 513) and sexism (Tang & Fox, 2016, p. 515).

The authors argue that individuals high in SDO feel threatened if they perceive that outsiders can compete with them (Tang & Fox, 2016, p. 516), and in the case of online video games and esports, this would mean that men would turn to sexist, misogynistic, and transphobic attitudes towards individuals that are as skilled or more skilled than them in a video game. This research using SDO concluded that it was related to both sexual and general harassment in video games and hostile sexism (Tang & Fox, 2016, p. 517-518). Sometimes sexism is so prevalent in video games that conversely when some men genuinely confront said behaviour they may be perceived as having ulterior motives (Tang & Fox, 2016, p. 518). Notably, the authors mention that there is a possible limitation of their research due to discussing online harassment with players based on their experiences in only one video game of their participants’ choice (Tang & Fox, 2016, p. 518). They note that previous research has shown that video game genres vary in gendered preferences (Tang & Fox, 2016, p. 518), and this research project will importantly

cover experiences by women in a video game genre known as “first-person shooters” (FPS) which overwhelmingly consists of cis men and women, speaking from personal experience, normally do not prefer playing this genre of games. This research that focuses on harassment by men in online video games concludes that the predictors for this harassment are the same for harassment in other social contexts (Tang & Fox, 2016, p. 519).

Misogyny is one of the central themes to this research project. Much of the existing feminist literature focuses on how misogyny affects everyone in society. Feminists seemingly cannot always agree on defining the term (Wrisley, 2023, p. 189), though the most used and simplest definition tends to be “the hatred of women” (Wrisley, 2023, p. 191). This research project would define the term “misogyny” the same. Laura Bates defines it within the same terms in her books. Other literature accepts this term as a definition for “misogyny”. Wrisley in her article further explains that this definition is not simply “the hatred of women” but a political and institutional problem that informs every aspect of society, culture, and politics (Wrisley, 2023, p. 205). It is a worldview that believes in the inferiority of women and justifies their mistreatment due to a societally constructed gender hierarchy (Wrisley, 2023, p. 205). While this greater and expanded term will certainly influence how this research project will interpret and explain certain findings, it will conveniently stick to the widely accepted and simple definition of it.

“Misogyny and sexism on the internet” is a narrow topic most relevant to this research project if traditional and electronic sports are excluded for a moment. Poland argues that the internet is simply an extension of pre-existing misogynist expectations and behaviours that are seen in “real-world” patriarchal societies (2016, p. 41). Her book suggests that marginalized women experience even greater harassment online (Poland, 2016, p. 11). Laura Bates’s books

seemingly further support Poland's argument that behaviour online is simply an extension of pre-existing misogynist behaviours in the "real-world". Research done by Antunovic seems to further support this claim in their work that focuses on online harassment towards women sports journalists (Antunovic, 2019). Literature that focuses on online misogyny and hatred seem to unanimously echo this claim, and some previous research further shows that "transgender and gender diverse individuals experience higher rates of bullying than their cisgender peers" (Pellicane & Ciesla, 2022, p. 2). This connection between behaviour in the "real-world" and the online world that literature has constantly identified will be important to note for this research project to explain the application of feminist and queer theory from wider societal contexts onto experiences of individuals in esports. Online harassment in general should be taken very seriously, as a study estimates that "about 44 percent of internet users have personally experienced some form online harassment" (Pevac, 2022, p. 1287).

Results from studies that have particularly focused on studying underlying causes of misogyny and interpersonal violence have interestingly found that misogynistic men behave similarly to narcissists and are more likely to engage in violence and hold thoughts of revenge to protect their inflated egos (Rottweiler et al., 2021, p. 22-23). The author further explains that a man attempting to restore their own self-worth, particularly when women are perceived as a threat to traditional gender hierarchies, may subscribe to misogyny as a result (Rottweiler et al., 2021, p. 22). Bates has mentioned that some men in extremely misogynist groups online may use feminism and feminists as an explanation behind why they believe in ideas that are misogynistic (Bates, 2021). I deem this claim to have some relevancy to this research project due to a pre-conceived opinion that I have formed prior to conducting interviews which backs up this claim by some of the literature. Anecdotally speaking, several women in esports that have used this



point in casual conversation to explain sexist, misogynist, and transphobic behaviour they have encountered in matches or ranked games. It would not be surprising that men view women that compete well in esports as a threat to “traditional gender hierarchies” where women are not “supposed” to be playing video games, which are seen by many as just a “guys only” hobby.

There are very little number of women that have seen any form of success in esports, only about five at the top level across various esports titles. Previous research in esports shows that the reason behind why this is the case is due to sexism, where women particularly struggle to prove their skill level and are simply excluded from the industry altogether (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018, p. 299). The same research mentions a stereotype that is sadly common between men in the field, which is that women are not as skilled as men (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018, p. 299). Content analysis in other research that has focused on how women streamers get treated compared to men streamers has shown that women streamers are almost twice as likely to receive sexist comments when compared to men (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018, p. 305). “Streamers” are individuals that stream their gameplay to the world on platforms such as Twitch (the most popular streaming platform for gamers) or YouTube, which is normally accompanied by a webcam that shows their face, body, and live reactions to their own gameplay. It would not be difficult for anyone to simply tune in to a woman competitor’s stream to find any sexist or hateful comments from viewers, and this hate is even more common among forums that discuss competitive matches and tournaments that took place. Popular women that stream which receive low number of comments compared to other popular streamers would approximately get one comment every two minutes that can be categorized as sexual harassment (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018, p. 307). This study does not however note how women that stream their gameplay typically react to sexist and hateful comments. Anecdotally speaking, they generally do their best to ignore them, and popular streamers have

several moderators which are actively moderating their chat for unwanted comments. The minimal research that has been done with current and past women esports competitors, especially those that are considered “feminist icons” like Geguri from an esports title known as “Overwatch” (now Overwatch 2), suggests that the very few successful women in esports avoid attaching themselves to feminist labels for their own safety (Cullen, 2018, p. 950). The gaming and esports environment is so negative towards women that players understand that labeling themselves as feminists in the video gaming industry easily leads to a further increase in negative attention by men in a male-dominated industry (Cullen, 2018, p. 950). Online hate in the form of misogyny and transphobia is so prevalent that women try their best to avoid bringing more attention to themselves because they understand it would simply attract more negativity.

Misogyny and transphobia may have been the “default” positions among men in many sports ever since their existence. Most sports have historically been considered “made by and for men” which excluded and prohibited women from them (Howe, 2022, p. 456). Formula 1 is an example of a traditional sport that recently attempted to be a unisex sport though it still only saw a few women drivers successfully compete in it (Howe, 2022, p. 455). Sexism and transphobia in many sports has become so ingrained in many people that they do not even attempt to challenge this outdated view. Many would understand the need for a separate women’s and men’s competition in many sports due to perceived physical differences between average cis men and women (Howe, 2022, p. 456), alongside historical barring of opportunities for women. The skill differences required to succeed in esports require no segregation based on sex (Holden et al., 2020, p. 3). Esports has a unique promise of gender equity that has never materialized within traditional sports, where physical differences make no difference in competitors’ abilities to perform.

Previous research shows that sex and gender harassment in esports had led elite women and LGBTQ+ gamers to completely stop pursuing their passion (Holden et al., 2020, p. 3). It also further backs up some points made by other research done in online video games, importantly that historic anonymity in online gaming has fostered growth of antisocial behaviour which has led to a third of women gamers to report abuse or discrimination by men, with one in ten women claiming to have been threatened by rape by men during online play (Holden et al., 2020, p. 9). This research by Holden et al. also further supports other findings where the success of women in video gaming has threatened and pushed men and boys in gaming to be at greater risk for antisocial behaviours (2020, p. 9). These authors further explain that online harassment of women in recreational and professional video gaming is well documented (Holden et al., 2020, p. 11) and provided GamerGate and Remilia as examples. Maria “Remilia” Creveling was the first and only transgender woman to compete at the professional level in an esports title known as “League of Legends” in what was known as the League of Legends Championship Series (LCS). Her career was very short due to anxiety brought on from constant harassment from viewers in comments sections and live-stream feeds which were overwhelming with transphobic and sexist statements about her appearance and gender identity (Holden et al., 2020, p. 12). Other examples that are mentioned in their research further add context to simply how prevalent sexism is within the field even among elite men that compete in esports. Backing up other research done on the treatment on streamers, this article shows how a very popular streamer known as “Annemunition” who had more than 300,000 followers on Twitch has spoken out about how bad online toxicity is, especially for women or people that are “othered” by the community (Holden et al., 2020, p. 18-19). The term “toxicity” would be understood by this project as significantly rude, disrespectful, or unreasonable language used against someone online. In other words, cyber

harassment, and cyber bullying (Sheth et al., 2021, p. 1). It is simply a way people online refer to any instances of sexism, misogyny, transphobia, racism, and other forms of hatred under one term.

Building onto an example of transphobia in esports from previously mentioned research, there is still a massive gap waiting to be filled when it comes to particularly researching transphobia in esports. In traditional sports, previous research reveals that athletes who identify as transgender are discriminated at a greater rate than those that are gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Cunningham & Pickett, 2018, p. 220), which is incredibly likely to be the true in esports too. This research article notes that LGBTQ+ prejudice has had a decrease over time and sports have had a dramatic improvement in the past decades for lesbian and gay athletes (Cunningham & Pickett, 2018, p. 221). The authors note that they expect to find similar patterns for trans prejudice in the future once there are more trans-inclusive healthcare options and training for trans inclusiveness in the workplace (Cunningham & Pickett, 2018, p. 221). It has been five years since this journal article was published and I would disagree that this has been true thus far. It may be that those patterns have not emerged due to a lack of adequate training and trans-inclusive healthcare, but recent developments in the current sociopolitical context that this research project is taking place in would likely suggest that there has been no improvement in trans and nonbinary prejudice. Similarly, to transgender prejudice, stereotyping can be considered a form of prejudice against a certain group of people. When it comes to transgender stereotypes in video games, previous research suggests that adequate character representation in video games would lead transgender youth to know that they too can live fulfilling and successful lives (Herriot & Fry, 2021, p. 15). While this claim is not made from sports or esports-related research, it follows a similar claim that this research project would consider a

barrier for women in esports. It supports the importance of adequate representation and visibility for certain people in certain spaces.

Most research that has been done on video games or esports using a feminist lens has been conducted using various types of content analysis. They would mostly focus on the portrayal of characters by video game developers and what messaging and symbolization these characters would send across to their players. Several studies have been done focusing on video game characters that resemble harmful sexist and misogynistic beliefs towards women and how they may have affected women that enjoyed playing video games (McCullough et al., 2020, p. 266). The way the same journal article defines “internalized misogyny” is the same way this research project will define this term which is “the devaluing of women, distrust of women, and bias toward men among women” (McCullough et al., 2020, p. 268). The authors mention that other research has found that frequent enjoyment of video games leads to more overt and antagonistic beliefs against women and that women gamers may also share negative attitudes toward women in relation to gaming (2020, p. 268). Their own research has supported their hypothesis that the more frequently women play video games, the more positively could internalized misogyny be predicted within them (McCullough et al., 2020, p. 272). Their research also found that more frequent enjoyment of video games in general leads to more negative beliefs about women such as women cannot be trusted, they are less competent, or they are poor leaders (McCullough et al., 2020, p. 272). These findings stand out from other content analysis done of similar fashion where authors typically interpret symbolism and messaging through characteristics and attitudes of women in video games only based off their own judgement and opinion. I do not consider that to be the best approach to understanding misogynistic and sexist attitudes in video games, though the goals of research of that nature are

usually different from the goals of this research project. Interestingly, McCullough et al. point out that one notable limitation in their study is that video game usage is normally restricted to those that can afford it, so their sample and findings may not be generalizable to individuals from low-income backgrounds (2020, p. 272). This would have to be considered by this research project too and listed as a possible limitation, as research in esports would suffer with the same limitation. The sample of this research was also predominantly white and thus may not be generalizable to racial and ethnic minority women (McCullough et al., 2020, p. 273), which depending on the makeup of the future participants in this project, it may have to be stated as a possible limitation. This project will focus on prioritizing women that belong to ethnic minority groups as they are likely underrepresented in the field. Anecdotal experience would suggest that certain ethnic minority groups are much less represented than others, where seeing successful women of an East Asian ethnic background in esports is way more common than seeing successful women of an African ethnic background in esports.

Interestingly, all the qualitative research that this literature review has covered consists of people that identify as women. The ultimate goal of this research project is for the experiences of cisgender and transgender women in esports to be heard. The preliminary inquiry into this literature review hinted that a glaring gap in literature that focuses particularly on salaried and competitive cisgender and transgender women's experiences in esports exists. It has suggested that research that has covered the experiences of women in esports has almost exclusively focused on quantitative methods such as content analysis performed by the author. Depending on the societal position of the author, it can often be interpreted as how, like usual, a cisgender and straight man analyzes and interprets interactions and content on the internet and how he understands they may impact the population that he wishes to research (women). This research

project will not focus on any content analysis and instead on qualitative semi-structured interviews with cisgender and transgender women in esports. Their experiences that could be shared with the rest of the world through this research can hopefully bring significant discourse to the topics of hatred in esports, particularly when attempting to understand sexism, misogyny, and transphobia, which are commonplace in esports. There is a benefit to understanding previous content analysis done which may fit the scope of this project, as their results and findings have potential to influence the interpretation of data as well as influencing the research questions of the project.

There is one noticeable limitation found in literature through this review. The discussion of transphobic women and trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs) in esports is seemingly unrepresented in research in esports. Anecdotal experience would suggest that transphobic women that compete in esports do exist. This research project will research this theme in more detail and contribute to a significant gap that is missing in current esports literature. Another limitation found within this project's literature review is how previous research almost never interviewed women in esports directly about their personal experiences on topics of sexism, misogyny, and transphobia in the field.

Many of the themes found in previous research within traditional and electronic sports through this project's literature review will be influential in the methodology, discussion, and findings of this research paper. SDO, barriers for women in competitions, internalized misogyny, transphobia (transgender and nonbinary prejudice), and online harassment towards women in general will be vital to the development and completion of this project. The findings from previous research in literature will inform the knowledge established for this research project prior to conducting interviews with the correct participants and they will help understanding and

interpreting the data gathered through these interviews. Claims and findings from previous research will be challenged by this research project to find out whether this project's findings support or disprove previous findings.



## Methods

Data were collected from ten individuals who had to self-identify for the most accurate representation of their answers in this study. Four participants self-identified as transwomen, four self-identified as just “women” or cisgendered women, and two participants self-identified as transfem non-binary. This research project will consider the data gathered from the participants that identified as transfem non-binary as a separate “non-binary” category for the sake of accurate representation and to note potential differences between answers. It is thus extremely important to also emphasize that the comparison of data categorized as “cis-gender women” and “transgender women” is only done so to note differences in experiences in the field of esports. Otherwise, all individuals that identify as women are obviously women. Compensation was also included and fully funded by Kwantlen Polytechnic University’s “Student Research and Innovation Grant” under file-number “KPU-SRIG 2023-28” which was emailed to participants on the same day as interviews took place.

This research project relied primarily on purposive sampling. Posts were made on “X (formerly known as Twitter),” where the project topics were advertised to over 6,000 people. These people mostly consisted of people directly involved with esports who either fit all the purposive criteria themselves or likely knew competitors who did. Many participants were recruited through direct messaging on “Steam” which is the most popular store or gaming platform which CS is played through. The participants who were directly messaged through either “Steam” or “X (Twitter)” were the ones that the researcher already knew fit all the purposive criteria set for this project.

One hurdle the researcher encountered during recruiting was that individuals who were directly messaged usually did not respond or were not interested in participating in the research. There was a theme where individuals who had prior knowledge of the researcher and his esports background had a much higher chance of being comfortable with being interviewed on camera than individuals who had no previous knowledge of the researcher. Since the researcher's most recent successful competitive esports history was in the "Counter-Strike" (CS) franchise, all participants that were interviewed had a competitive history in the franchise too. Most had a competitive history in CS:GO, while all but one continued to compete in "Counter-Strike 2" (CS2), which just released on September 27, 2023. One individual had no competitive history in CS2, though they had a salaried esports history in other esports titles unrelated to the genre of "first-person shooters" (FPS) in their extensive esports journey.

The inclusion criteria that needed to be met by participants was the following:

1. They must be at least 18 years old.
2. They must identify as a woman.
3. They must have played for an esports organization that has provided any salary for their players, or they must have played in an esports competition that has a prize pool.

The last criterion was defined as such due to the number of salaried esports women who get paid a living wage. From anecdotal experience, only two salaried women's esports teams in CS were paid a living wage, even though there were many other salaried teams. If the criteria were strictly "women that get salaried a living wage" instead of "women that compete for monetary prizes" or "women that get salaried any wage," then the likelihood of finding enough candidates that have recently competed in esports that are willing to be interviewed would be extremely low.

While snowball sampling did not directly lead to individuals that participated, it was used through some individuals to identify potential participants which ultimately did not lead to them

participating. There was at least two participants that likely participated due to a form of snowball sampling in the form of “retweets” of the researcher’s original posts on X (Twitter) by other esports competitors. The researcher speculates this only due to those participants initially expressing their interest in participating without the researcher reaching out to them through a direct message of their own. The researcher also did not have a connection with these two participants prior to pursuing this research project. Snowball sampling thus seemingly connected the researcher to at least two willing participants that he otherwise may not have interviewed.

Data collection took place online. Interviews were held over the platform “Zoom” and recorded and stored in a separate passcode-protected OneDrive that only the principal and co-investigators had access to. Since esports is primarily an online environment, participants who competed in women’s leagues in esports titles like CS2 could live and participate in this study from any part of the world. This research project focused only on competitors currently participating in North American competitions due to prior connections and knowledge of the researcher. The literature review suggests that there is a possibility that societal phenomena and contexts differ between esports regions. The realities that women in esports face in North America may be vastly different from those of other esports regions such as Europe, South Korea, and China. One research article on the topic of feminism and women competing in esports, which focuses on the successful Overwatch 2 competitor “Geguri,” suggests that competitive women in esports do not want to label themselves as feminists (Cullen, 2018, p. 949). This may be the case due to them being esports competitors in South Korea, a region where the topic of feminism is seemingly viewed as much more “divisive” than in North America, particularly due to the Korean “4B movement” (Sussman, 2023). According to previous research, “openly feminist women in the games industry in South Korea experience increased

negative attention” from men (Cullen, 2018, p. 950). Societal contexts like these that vary across different regions of the world is why this research project strived only to seek potential interviewees within North America. All participants were also fully comfortable and fluent to be interviewed in English by the researcher. Continuously reviewing collected data, along with engaging in constant reflexivity, was crucial to this project (Reid et al., 2017, p. 222).

Participants were informed of their ability to give and withdraw consent at any point during the research process. They signed a consent form prior to setting up an interview or consented verbally on recording just before beginning an interview. At times throughout the interview, they were reminded that they did not have to answer questions they did not feel like answering, they did not have to share information they did not feel comfortable sharing, and that they could withdraw their consent at any point during the interview at which point all data collected up to then will be destroyed immediately.

Chapter 4 of TCPS 2 covers “the principle of Justice”, which is one of the four ethical considerations in research. It addresses how individuals and groups that might be inappropriately excluded due to attributes such as their race, age, gender, culture, language, and disability should be included in research (TCPS 2, 2022, p.66). Individuals in this research were not excluded due to their culture, language, religion, sexual orientation, disability, ethnicity, or linguistic proficiency. There were valid reasons for two exclusions in this research which match the scope and research questions of this project. People that identify as men and those that were not at least eighteen years old were excluded.

The data gathered from interviews with participants is divided into three categories to compare varying experiences in detail. This was only possible due to the participants' courageous decision to self-identify. The researcher deeply appreciates each participant's willingness to do so, even though they were made aware that they had the option not to answer questions they did not want to. The three categories that stemmed from participants' self-identification are: "cisgender women", "transgender women", and "non-binary".

## Findings

Ten interviews were conducted that spanned mostly between thirty-five to forty-five minutes, with only two lasting a full hour. Pre-set interview questions were constructed from the researcher's personal experiences from competing in "League of Legends" (LoL), "Counter-Strike" (CS), and "Valorant" between 2014 and 2022 which were also influenced by feminist and queer theory. The researcher took an extensive dive into queer theory when constructing questions inquiring about the experiences of LGBTQ+ women to ensure they approached sensitive topics more carefully. This was important as the researcher recognizes their bias and privilege when it comes to discussing and inquiring about topics about women's experiences and especially LGBTQ+ women's experiences. Some previous research which covers video gaming from a critical race perspective was also included in the literature review to further keep the researcher's privilege in check when interviewing women who identify as non-European.

The categories that the data was coded under in particular were the following: "self-identification", "barriers to entry", "compensation and opportunities", "current state of the scene", "forms of discrimination", "preventative measures", "transphobia among cis women", "memorable moments", "fan mail", "discouraged", "perceptions of women's leagues and co-ed", and "future of women's esports". The answers between all participants will be further compared depending on how they self-identified to see whether there are notable differences in opinions and answers.

### *Self-Identification*

The interviewer began by asking participants to briefly discuss their competitive history to "break-the-ice" and begin the conversation. The researcher already had a solid idea of the

participants' competitive history due to third-party websites in CS and Valorant normally keeping extensive history tabs on all professional and semi-professional competitors and the competitions they played in. He had to verify these competitive histories of every participant to ensure they met all the purposive criteria for the interview to even begin. The purpose of the question was also to ease participants in for the questions that related to self-identification which inquired about how they identified their gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity.

Seven of the ten participants identified as Caucasian. Two of the ten participants identified as Asian, and one participant identified as mixed-race. This ethnic representation is roughly what the researcher expected to find prior to beginning their research. From the researcher's anecdotal experience, it is incredibly rare to find competitors of African origin in first-person shooters. The researcher has only personally met three other such competitors (who were all cisgendered men) from his time competing in CS. It was not a surprise to not find a single woman competitor of African origin in the esports category of "first-person shooters". Some prior research which has studied how women of all backgrounds that played video games for an extensive period viewed themselves had a limitation where the researchers struggled to find a significant sample of women of African origin (McCullough et al., 2020, p. 269), thus their results may not be generalizable for women of said origin (McCullough et al., 2020, p. 273). Participant 7 similarly reflected on their time playing CS and who they have befriended over the years, mentioning that:

I don't think I've ever teamed with a person of colour. Like, why? How could that be true? I guess I have played with a couple of people of Asian descent, but I guess there's an intersection of like, in terms of games that black people tend to play tends to be fighting games and there's a bigger European scene in CS.

The findings of how participants self-identified in interviews for this research project suggests that this research project has the same limitation as McCullough et al.'s where its results may not be reflective of experiences of women of non-European or non-Asian ethnic backgrounds.

Participants were notified before and during the interview that they could choose not to answer questions they don't feel comfortable with. Two participants chose not to answer an identification question regarding their sexual orientation and two other participants did not answer a question regarding compensation as a result. Every other question posed by the researcher was answered in detail by participants. Only one woman from all participants identified as straight, which was a little surprising. However, seven women self-identified as "LGBTQ+" where two specifically identified as bisexual, three identified as pansexual, and two identified as lesbian. The researcher initially thought that more participants would refuse to answer this question prior to conducting interviews. It should be said that this may not accurately represent the true percentage of women in esports that identify as LGBTQ+. It may just reflect what women felt most comfortable being interviewed by the researcher, especially if they knew of him prior to this research project taking place.

### *Barriers to Entry*

Unsurprisingly, all but one participant completely agreed that there are several different barriers to entry for women in esports. Only one participant mentioned that she did not think barriers to entry existed for women, as she stated that you can make it to the top based on merit alone. Participant 1 particularly said "If you are just good enough, people will look at you for your gameplay [alone]". There is truth to this, as everyone that makes it to the top does so based on merit, but most require a substantial amount of luck to make it there too. Connections and



networking are incredibly important, and if you are a straight cisgendered man, you likely have the least chance to be disliked by other individuals simply due to your existence and identity in the esports scene, thus having a potential for making more connections more easily. To bring up a particular example shared by Participant 3, she said that: “there were so many times where it would change their minds (the team she is trying out for) as soon as they heard my voice”. This is an example of women having a sexist barrier that men do not experience when it comes to making connections and getting opportunities simply because they are women. To cover a more extreme example also shared by Participant 3, she also shared a personal experience with blatant sexism, saying: “I had people straight up refuse to try me out specifically because I was a girl”.

All other participants which stated that barriers to entry exist in esports used strong language to emphasize how much of an issue they believe it is. Participant 5 explained that “people just don’t take you seriously as a competitor sometimes [just because you’re a woman]”. Participant 8 and participant 10 explained that in their opinion, “there’s social barriers, no physical barriers”. This was the theme that was present among every participant that explained how they understood barriers to entry to exist in esports, particularly in games categorized as FPS.

Participant 3 shared her personal experience of how difficult it was for her to even get a chance to find a team at the bottom division in the league ladder in CS due to a sexist barrier she encountered. There should be no barrier to entry for any player in said division as a competitor often befriends another competitor while they play ranked games on a third-party client, and they normally stumble upon some league experience in this division. As a straight cisgender man, all it takes to compete in the lowest division in CS is to befriend some people that enjoy your company and then team-up together for a season to see what competing is like. There is roughly

a \$20 entry-fee per person involved to participate for at least twelve matches over the span of two months, and straight cisgender men would most likely universally agree that no barriers to entry would exist for them in the bottom division. This is seemingly not the case for many women. Participant 3 particularly explained that “it can be hard to find or make a team on your own at the beginning” which she then expanded on by giving credit to women’s leagues such as “ESL Impact” for “allowing a lot more women to get into the competitive scene and feel safe doing so”. Other participants echoed this opinion regarding “ESL Impact” where they believed it did a fine job at undoing one of several barriers to entry for women that compete. Participants 4, 5, 6, 8, and 9 all shared this exact same opinion, while the rest roughly agreed that women’s leagues in esports is a net positive for women. Most participants added that women’s leagues are needed because co-ed teams are just “not there yet” due to several social barriers.

Some experiences shared by participants spoke about how they believed some people in the esports scene, or at least more serious fans that follow the esports scene, have problems with the state of their personal mental health. Participant 7 mentioned that “barriers are a little bit lessened if you can find a route in” which she then elaborated on by explaining that “I think the barriers [in this case] are frankly the people who play Counter-Strike a lot have a lot of mental illness”. Participant 8 used similar language when sharing a personal experience that her and former teammates of hers shockingly went through which will be elaborated on later, though said experience made her understand that “there’s some really, really weird people in esports”. Answers regarding how participants generally shielded themselves from interacting with people that struggled with their own mental health problems in the scene boiled down to spending as much time as possible within their own circle of close friends that they fully trust are people who treat themselves and everyone around them with respect.

*Compensation and Opportunities*

The answers regarding compensation and opportunities for women in esports varied equally between three types: “currently fair”, “less opportunities”, and “don’t know or no answer”. There was no difference in the opinion of participants on these topics depending on how they self-identified. Four participants stated that compensation is currently fair while adding that it varies greatly between esports titles and even teams. Participant 10 mentioned that “everyone is overpaid” in esports, thus it is seemingly fair. Participant 1 shared that it is “hard to call as it’s a case-by-case thing”. Some participants such as participant 6 state that some esports titles are better at it than others such as “Valorant” and “Overwatch”.

Participants which shared that there are less opportunities for women emphasized that transgender women and non-binary individuals have even less opportunities than cisgender women. Participant 4 shared a personal experience, saying: “one of my previous teammates joked that she would be murdered twice. One for being gay and another time for being trans”. She then went on to explain that this conversation took place when they discussed certain events taking place in parts of the world which are not friendly and welcoming to women and even less so to individuals that identify as LGBTQ+. Thus, even though there are some opportunities that are only for women, when they are being held in hostile parts of the world, they are not an opportunity for many women in reality.

One concern that some participants had whilst discussing compensation is the realization they had that women’s teams were viewed as a “marketing team” by organizations that salaried them. Participant 8 shared this opinion while reflecting that such funding is still a positive thing as it leads to more women earning more money. Participant 4 similarly explained that:

Women's teams are kind of seen as like...you just pick them up so you can say that you have a women's team, we are kind of like...'we value diversity and everything' but I feel like I've also heard from people higher up and other teammates' experiences that other orgs treat women's team kind of like a second-tier team in their org.

On the point of women's teams being picked up for the sake of diversity, participant 1 shared that even though she is not public about her identity as it would simply lead to unwanted attention, she "reveals" her actual identity depending on the situation as organizations that may be interested in offering her teams a salary "may like it as they may seem more diverse".

### *Current State of the Scene*

The current environment of women's esports seems to be in a good state overall. Most participants share the opinion that it is much better than it used to be, even as far back as only six years ago. Participant 3 mentioned that it is "already night and day from when I started playing counter-strike six years ago". Participant 8 specifically explained that "back then it was way worse, and in the early 2000s". At the same time, four participants share the opinion that it very much varies depending on how one identifies, what esports title they compete in, and possibly what type of environment they find themselves in. Not even one participant mentioned that it is perfect or ideal. All but one participant mentioned that if you find yourself queuing a ranked game alone as a woman with nine other strangers, especially in FPS games, then it can be a hostile environment. Participants 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 10 all shared opinions and experiences that led to this conclusion.

Interestingly, some participants shared that they felt like women in esports had an issue with complacency which held back women's esports, particularly when it comes to taking

advantage of new opportunities and making meaningful progress in closing the skill gap between men and women. There is a difference in competition levels in women's leagues and normal co-ed leagues (mixed-gender teams). There is a big skill gap, and that's where she realized that she wants more than being the best in Impact as it is not quite that competitive. Participant 1 explained that they never understood how competitors at such a high level can be complacent with not being the best, saying "some teams, not just Impact, but Australia as well, will just straight up dodge you or won't play seriously just because you are the better team". She explained that it was not just an issue with women's teams, but an issue in all forms of competition in esports, which she did not quite understand. Participant 8 similarly reflected that it used to be her dream to play for "Organization\_R" and she felt awesome about eventually reaching her dream. She soon realized that her aspirations were greater than others when she realized that some former teammates were "okay with just being where they are at" as they were getting salaried.

### *Forms of Discrimination*

Discrimination and hatred are commonplace in esports. They come in different forms and levels which this project categorizes as "sexism", "transphobia", and "misogyny". This category of sexism would be more "casual" comments that women in esports may face just by queuing up a ranked game in a video game. It could also be hateful comments that they may encounter when competing in an official tournament match when money is on the line. Competitors have the option to re-watch a live broadcast of their match online usually on Twitch.tv or YouTube where they can also see the live comments that viewers left in the past during the game. Depending on the comment, competitors could see comments that could fit the category of "casual sexism" or "transphobia" more than "extreme misogyny" and vice versa.

Hateful comments are so commonplace during official live broadcasts when women's teams are playing that many participants do not re-watch broadcasts of their own games. When it comes to hateful comments on live broadcasts and forums such as HLTV, most participants shared that the frequency of hateful comments on them are awfully frequent. This project could not exactly measure which one of sexism, transphobia, or misogyny were most frequent, though most participants that expanded on how often they saw such comments was frightening. Participants 2, 4, 5, 8, and 9 particularly recounted seeing awful comments that fall under these categories for every single official match on HLTV and every single time their match was broadcasted on a live-streaming platform such as Twitch.tv. Participant 8 further explained that most comments she would generally see that are hateful are "get back in the kitchen" type comments which this project considers "casual" sexism. At the same time, participant 8 elaborated one memorable off-putting comment where one viewer commented about how they would sexually assault her and her team on LAN. She particularly recalled reading "oh the things I would do to them on LAN" by a viewer during a stream which is borderline criminal. Participant 8 also shared a similar experience that a friend of hers told her about from the same viewer that made those criminal comments on stream. That same viewer was a player on a team she previously tried out for and he said "if I ever saw her on LAN, I'd r\*pe her". These two experiences with this man made them remember his name so they could stay away from him if they ever encountered him at an offline tournament or event.

Sexual assault comments are not the only kind that would be considered extreme "misogynist" comments that women in esports may encounter. Participant 7 shared a personal experience where she overheard a man that she got on her team say "they are a woman playing CS, they are mentally ill" casually during a game whilst talking about women playing video

games. This opinion that “there’s something wrong if women enjoy a hobby men enjoy” may be shared by more men in esports than one may suspect. Participant 6 particularly shared how they noticed that there were many comments about a “Call of Duty” streamer that recently became incredibly popular where it was common to see the opinion of “if you are good at a game and you are a woman, you have to be cheating”. These are just more examples of misogyny that lurks within the minds of some men in esports which are often overshadowed by more “casual” and more frequent sexist and transphobic comments.

All participants which elaborated on their experiences seeing hate directed their way mentioned that even though they were thick-skinned, there was a breaking point or at least one instance that truly bothered them. Toxic remarks in solo queue type game modes where individuals have the option to queue alone for a higher or lower rating on a ladder-system is a daily occurrence which will be elaborated on in the following sub-section.

### *Preventative Measures*

Toxicity is so frequent in ranked game modes that participants and other competitors play daily to improve that they take various preventative measures to decrease the chances of encountering it. These preventative measures include but are not limited to queuing up with friends, hiding aspects of their in-game identity, using voice-changers, and muting or blocking people.

All participants mentioned that they prefer queuing up with a full team of friends over playing alone. Participant 1 and participant 10 shared that they did so not because they were avoiding toxicity per se, but because they wanted to play with other individuals that were skilled. They were essentially just avoiding being teamed up with lower-skilled teammates. The main

concern of all other participants was avoiding toxic teammates that would otherwise ruin their game, day, or week. Participants 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, and 9 mentioned they queue up with friends virtually every game. They all explained that it is likely that some person will otherwise say some off-putting comment if one queues for a game alone.

Participants shared that they had several ways in which they hid aspects of their in-game identity as a preventative measure when queueing up for ranked games. Changing in-game names is one of them. This is likely dependent on what esports title a competitor plays as it is easier to do in some video games than others. Participants 5 and 7 mentioned that they have done this in the past and that they know others who have done the same. Participant 5 mentioned that even when the interview was taking place, two of their current teammates had their name changed so people had a harder time recognizing them. Participant 4 and participant 8 shared that they avoided using certain pictures on their in-game profiles, such as pictures of themselves, so people did not assume that they were women. Participant 6 and participant 10 shared that they and their friends use “streamer mode” in Valorant when they play the game’s competitive game mode. Using “streamer mode” makes it so everyone else in the game does not see their actual username but instead gets a generic name for the character that they are playing. If they are using the Valorant agent “Jett” for that one ranked game, their name in the game would be “Jett” for everyone else. This would be so others do not know that they are playing against them and harass them for it. Participant 6 shared another preventative measure that may be unique to Valorant. They shared that they even though they are proud that they could showcase the title “VCT Game Changers” under their username, they often do not. This was because players on their team would purposefully sabotage the game to make them lose, essentially wasting more than thirty minutes of their time. As previously mentioned, participant 3 sometimes changed her identity



from female to male on ESEA to have a higher chance of finding a team that may give her a chance.

Many participants felt that women get treated differently depending on their voice. Trans women shared experiences that re-affirm this opinion by participants. Some of them mentioned that they only use the real voice that they want when they are not around strangers in games. Others mentioned that they are not interested in voice training and that they have personally witnessed friends being treated with less respect once they seriously trained their voice. One cis woman shared a personal experience she had where she was tired of being mistreated by random teammates she encountered when playing ranked games due to her voice. She downloaded a voice changer and immediately was treated with more respect. Participant 8 shared an opinion she then concluded that “women get treated with more respect when they use voice changers”. Participant 6 shared a similar opinion, saying that “cis women and trans women that have voice trained a lot definitely have a much harder time”. While reflecting on voice training, participant 7 also said:

The moment I start doing it [voice training], the more people will start treating me like a woman in the game, and that is nice in some ways, because I am a woman, but now I have to deal with all the sexist pieces of shit bullshit. It is one thing that is legitimately stopping me from it.

Muting or blocking people is an option that every esports title has at their disposal for people that play their game. It is one measure that game creators have always included in multiplayer games to avoid accountability for some of their users mistreating others. Participants 2, 9, and 10 all stated that they muted the entire enemy team from the start of the game. Some

participants shared that they mute people, both teammates and opponents, only after they say something horrible.

### *Transphobia among cis women*

TERFs exist outside of esports and thus it is not surprising that some of them may exist in esports too. This project does not attempt to claim that women who compete in esports are feminist by default. When it comes to the topic of whether some competitive cisgender women refuse to play alongside transgender women on their team, most participants agreed that it happens. All participants that self-identified as transgender women agreed that it happens without a doubt. Participants that self-identified as cisgender women were split in their answers. Only one participant mentioned that she did not think this happened, which was a good thing in her eyes. Participant 2 explained that it happens in North America though it is a bigger problem in Europe as the game is particularly way more popular in parts of Europe that are regressive when it comes to accepting trans women. Participant 3 said that it does happen though less-so nowadays due to the talent pool of cisgender women being limited. She shared that she has personally heard someone say: “oh you are not good even though you are transgender”. Participant 5 particularly recalled that she played alongside a transphobic teammate who would say bad things about her and that she “should not be playing in the league”, presumably due to her being transgender. Participant 6 elaborated that women who have been competing for over a decade are the ones that tend to be “TERF-ier” in her eyes. Participant 10 recalled that she was told that certain competitors would not play alongside transgender women. It seems that transphobia is not only present among cisgender men in esports but among some women too. Intersectionality is key to understanding this issue and explain the findings of this project as

women that do not identify as transgender are seemingly less likely to be aware that this problem sadly exists in some parts of women's esports.

### *Memorable Moments*

Unsurprisingly, most candidates that shared instances which were most memorable to them from their time in esports shared individual experiences that only they experienced personally. However, five participants shared that they considered the same instance of rampant transphobia shared by a popular public figure in CS over X (formerly Twitter) in 2023 against Competitor\_A to be a big turning point that opened their eyes to rampant transphobia and hatred. It made them realize that maybe the hatred they thought was slowly going away in esports was ever-present but hidden. That moment, and particularly the incredible amount of hatred that was sent towards some transgender women and their cisgender and transgender teammates was an incredibly tough and memorable moment for them and a huge wake-up call. Participant 3 particularly reflected that “silence also speaks a lot of words, notably the situation with Competitor\_A” when talking about the reaction of other people in the scene over this incident.

Only one participant shared a positive interaction as a personal memorable moment from their time competing in esports. Participant 8 remembers a fan interaction where fans came up to her during a LAN event (an offline tournament) and expressed that they found it cool and encouraging to see teams like hers competing the way they did at the time.

### *Fan Mail*

Receiving private messages on social media or on third-party clients such as ESEA was a common issue for some participants and other competitors they know or have known. When five participants shared an incident that stuck with them since and discussed transphobia that was

directed towards Competitor\_A for being a transgender woman, that was just one of many examples. Competitors constantly receive messages personally to their accounts when they lose games that watchers bet on with real money. These are often in the form of personal death threats, death threats to relatives, along with more targeted racist, sexist, or transphobic hate. In a way, this is not unique to esports, as traditional sports athletes go through the same type of “fan mail” from “supporters” when they lose, as mentioned by Participant 1.

Participant 5 shared that when she experienced said targeted transphobia over X (formerly Twitter) which five other participants brought up as their most memorable moment in esports that has still stuck with them months later, she received an overwhelming amount of hate in her personal messages. She said that “every ten minutes someone was saying something terrible to me. Even the comments on the post, a lot of them I’m pretty sure got taken down for hate or something, which is crazy for twitter standards, it was bad”. Transphobia and sexism often gets so unbearable on social media or forums that HLTV has only recently begun moderating the comment sections of ESL Impact games. Participants 2, 5, and 10 elaborated that it is only a recent phenomenon, and that a vast majority of comments on some ESL Impact games end up being deleted by moderators, which is a small step in the right direction.

### *Discouraged*

Some participants shared that they personally knew individuals who competed in the past and stopped doing so once they realized how bad sexism, misogyny, and transphobia is in esports. One important finding regarding this is that from all participants that shared the fact that they knew individuals who stopped competing due to hatred was the source of where the hatred came from. It was not because former teammates or other competitors were hateful towards them

or others. The source of this was the hateful comments they would constantly see in online forums such as HLTV, online streaming websites such as Twitch.tv, or on social media such as X (formerly Twitter) which were way too much to handle for some.

Participant 5 which was personally involved on the receiving end of transphobic discourse over X (formerly Twitter) further shared that said instance of blatant transphobia discouraged two fellow competitors from playing in the women's esports scene in CS. She explained that "it made them stop playing because there are so many transphobic remarks online. It definitely affects the players. They completely stopped playing Impact because they did not want that to happen to them". Participant 9 proves participant 5's point, as she mentioned that she never wanted to even attempt to compete in the women's league due to seeing how rampant transphobia can be online. Participant 3 had similarly shared knowing people who have been discouraged before, saying:

I have known quite a few players that have given up on competing or refuse to get into it because of a couple of like...toxic situations that they have run into, and I feel like that's really common early on.

### *Perceptions of Women's Leagues and Co-ed*

All participants unanimously agreed that women's leagues are a net positive for women in esports and the scene as a whole. Participants 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8 and 9 explained that the big reason behind why women's leagues such as ESL Impact and VCT: Game Changers are needed currently in esports is due to many social barriers historically preventing women from competing in esports. They further elaborated that it allows more women to begin competing in esports in a safe manner.

All participants also unanimously agreed that co-ed teams are the ultimate goal for women in esports. Most acknowledged that it could just not currently happen in esports, mainly due to social barriers and men not wanting to play with women. Participant 1 shared her opinion that she currently does not compete in women's leagues to personally improve but to win more money, while participant 8 similarly mentioned that in her career she currently has to play on co-ed teams to further improve as a player. Participants generally echoed the opinion that there is obviously no difference in skill between men and women, leading to all of them to conclude that co-ed is the eventual goal. Co-ed teams would be inevitable if social barriers are adequately addressed, structural problems dealt with accordingly, and enough time and support is provided for women in esports to catch up and eventually thrive with nothing else holding them back.

#### *Future of Women's Esports*

One surprising theme that emerged from answers when participants were asked to share their opinion about the future of women's esports is that there was an obvious divide between cisgender and transgender women in their answers. Cisgender women were much more optimistic about the future of women's esports, especially when they compared it to its state in the early 2010s or 2000s. While this is valid and true, transgender women rightfully were much more skeptical and fearful of the future. They acknowledged that women's esports is in a much better spot currently than in the past, though they are particularly afraid of foreign investments in CS. Many transgender women seem to also understand that even though there is better treatment of women and more opportunities for women, transphobia still lurks in the shadows of many esports competitors or followers that identify as men. Even when participants that self-identified as transgender women reflected on how they are wary of the future of women's esports, they still

acknowledged that there is a notable difference between women's esports currently and what it was just ten years ago.

Sometimes competitors are still reminded that there is evident pushback or resistance to all the progress that women are making in esports. Participant 1 brought up drama that occurred on social media on the day of the interview which made her realize that some individuals just do not get the point. There was some controversial online discourse over a Danish women's team (Astralis Women) suggesting that the female agent skins (the aesthetic look of the character that players control in CS) should be free to play (Richman, 2024). They suggested that it would lead to more women playing CS (Richman, 2024) as currently the only agents that are free to play as are male. When participant 1 reflected on this drama, some men on social media expressed their opinion that they should not and seemed to explain their opinion with the idea that "there are more important issues to fix". The researcher agrees with participant 1 in that men who oppose this simply do not "get it". It would have a net positive impact on esports to do anything to make video games and esports more appealing towards half the world's population.

Participant 1 and participant 8 also shared that they hoped that esports would monetarily stabilize in the future. Participant 10 similarly said "I think everyone is paid too much in esports", suggesting that smart business management is crucial to bring much-needed stability in the scene. Esports has never been a stable career choice for most as it is rare for any competitors to enjoy rewarding and long-lasting careers. Anecdotally speaking, for each salaried competitor that gets paid a living wage, there may be at least twenty that are salaried a non-living wage. Then for those twenty there are hundreds that are almost good enough to compete for these non-living wages. In 2018, investments in esports were up to \$4.5 billion from just \$490 million the year before (Chow, 2022). Salaries for competitors were only a small fraction of this number.

The pandemic brought back instability as investments started dwindling, especially for scenes that survived due to the importance of offline tournaments such as CS. More organizations cease operations nowadays due to lack of investment or running at a loss for an extended period (sproutGG, 2024). Some that are still around and pay living wages to competitors have a shady history as to how they managed to afford their players high salaries. An example of this would be “FaZe” who had a conflict of interest where they operated their own gambling platform (Noack, 2020), which is a controversial topic in esports on its own and something that is outside of this project’s scope. It is unclear through this project whether there is any difference in pay in women’s esports, particularly in CS, when compared to a difference in pay in men’s esports. It seems that the uneven wage structure and the instability of the scene affects men and women in esports at the same rate at an individual level.



## Discussion

The researcher is incredibly grateful for the ten individuals that willingly participated and dedicated up to an hour of their time to be interviewed for the purpose of this research. As the researcher identifies as a straight and cisgender man of full European origin, he felt that it is incredibly important to be well-read on previous relevant literature based on feminist, queer, and critical race theory. He hopes that the data he obtained through interviewing women in esports are represented as best as possible in this project.

Esports and video games in general have always been viewed as a “male-dominated” field (Tang & Fox, 2016, p. 514). This point is backed up by findings where all participants shared this opinion regarding esports titles that fall under the FPS category. This is where this project has a limitation. All but one of the participants that were interviewed had a competitive esports history in only games that are known as FPS. Many only had one esports title under their experience too which was CSGO and CS2. Some had some experience in Valorant, but only one had some personal experience in fighting games. The limitation of this research project is that due to the researcher’s personal connections and years of experience where he was salaried to compete specifically in CSGO, the findings of this project may only be representative of competitors in CS or “first-person shooters” more broadly. The findings may not accurately represent the experiences of competitors in other esports. One example where this limitation was evident even during the interviews was when some participants that had a broader knowledge of other esports titles specified that women’s experiences may be much more positive in “fighting games” than FPS such as CS. The popular speculation among some participants which the researcher agrees with was a key difference in the competitive environment. In “fighting games” and “real-time strategies”, competitors usually compete in one-versus-one settings. This means

that many barriers that women are faced with in most FPS (“Quake” would be an exception) are non-existent in esports competition where one individual competes solely against another lone individual. CS and other FPS are generally a five-on-five setting, or sometimes a six-on-six setting. This could be a big reason why there are so many “social barriers to entry” for women in esports especially when it comes to finding a co-ed team.

Discrimination can range from “casual” sexism or bigotry to more extreme forms of misogyny and transphobia. It can also vary in the ways in which a competitor may encounter any form of discrimination. It could range from experiencing it directly or indirectly. Direct interactions would be ones where a competitor would personally encounter them in real-time where an individual directing hate their way does so in front of the competitor during a game in which they are a part of together. This could happen in casual game modes such as: “quickplay”, “matchmaking”, more serious ranked game modes which all multiplayer games have (or in the case of CS it would mostly be a ranked ladder on third-party clients such as FACEIT and ESEA), competitive league or tournament matches (examples in CS would be ESEA: Main, ESL Impact, FACEIT: Advanced, tournament qualifiers, “cash cups”). Indirect versions of these would be ones where the competitor likely does not experience these interactions in real-time but rather they occur at separate times between when an individual posts a hateful comment or remark and the other individual reads said hateful comment or remark. Competitors of any game likely encounter indirect hateful comments through social media sites such as X (formerly Twitter) or game-specific forums such as “HLTV” for CS, “v1r.gg” for Valorant, or even “Reddit” with specific subreddits that were created for different esports titles.

Findings from this research re-affirm findings in other literature. Previous research has suggested that discrimination in the forms of sexism, misogyny, and transphobia has led to elite

women and LGBTQ+ gamers to completely stop pursuing esports (Holden et al., 2020, p. 3). Participants 3, 5, and 9 shared how they personally were discouraged from competing and took a long break or do not want to pursue women's esports altogether due to the amount of harassment they see online. When participant 5 shared their experience dealing with transphobia every ten minutes over X (formerly Twitter) she mentioned that she personally knew two other fellow competitors that stopped competing due to that incident. Since five out of the ten participants personally shared that this incident of extreme transphobia was one that they still remember months after it happened and due to the number of participants sharing that they or people they know have been discouraged from competing because of it, Holden et al.'s previous finding is re-affirmed with this project.

Previous research suggests that the factory of anonymity which exists in online gaming has led to an increase in antisocial behaviour. This antisocial behaviour has then led to a third of women gamers to report abuse or discrimination by men, with one in ten reported that they were threatened with rape by men while they were playing (Holden et al., 2020, p. 9). Participants 2, 3, and 5 echoed a similar conclusion regarding online anonymity, where they speculated that some people who are hateful online simply feel like they have nothing to lose, which re-affirms Holden et al.'s previous claim. To further re-affirm a previous finding by Holden et al., in this research project, one out of ten participants shared that rape comments were made about them, their teammates, and friends. Participant 8 sharing her personal experience of a man that competes in and follows esports saying such comments backs Holden et al.'s finding down to the exact number. The number of participants which dealt with such rape comments (one in ten), while not definitive, are consistent with Holden et al.'s findings.

Ruvalcaba et al.'s content analysis of streams has concluded that women who stream are twice as likely to receive sexist comments compared to men (2018, p. 305). Two participants in this project shared incidents they noticed with women who streamed. Participant 9 mentioned that in a daily stream, her friend who streamed to about twenty-thirty viewers got four separate hateful comments in her one session. Participant 6 reflected on controversy surrounding a "Call of Duty" streamer which was popular at the time who had a poor showing at a local tournament which led to men accuse her frequently of cheating. She specifically recalled that "if you are good at a game and you are a woman, you have to be cheating". This sexist attitude alongside participant 9's reflections re-affirm these findings regarding how women receive sexist comments twice as much as men. It may be even higher than only twice as much.

This sexist attitude of "if you are good, you must be cheating" that women deal with may stem from men being afraid of women entering their "domain of men and boys" (Holden et al., 2020, p. 9), lower skilled men feeling threatened by skilled women in a male-dominated environment (Kasumovic & Kuznekoff, 2015, p. 1), old sexist attitudes, or a combination of any or all of these factors. Even though two participants in this research project stated that they had read and agreed with Kasumovic & Kuznekoff's study and findings, the opinions of all participants were evenly split between "there is no difference", "casual or lower-skilled men are worse" and "casual or lower-skilled men are better" when it comes to their levels of toxicity towards women in esports. Thus, the findings of this research does not support Kasumovic & Kuznekoff's findings and explanation.

This research found several different barriers that exist in esports for women which affirmed barriers for women covered by previous research in Formula 1. It also further expanded with some new barriers that are unique to esports and would never exist in the realm of

traditional sports. In Formula 1, Howe in her research concluded that several social barriers existed for women, which are also true for women in esports. These social barriers were: 1) historical and current attitudes, 2) money, and 3) not being taken seriously, and 4) representation or (in)visibility (Howe, 2022, p. 455). This research confirms that these social barriers also exist in esports. One specific interesting similarity found in this research with previous research in Formula 1 is that two participants shared personal experiences where they had a realization that women's teams may be viewed as marketing teams by some organizations. There may be a difference where women in traditional sports, while they may also be viewed as athletes for the purpose of marketing too, are hypersexualized (Howe, 2022, p. 459-460) while women in esports may not be. This project does not suggest that this fact exists or does not exist through this research.

What is unique about dealing against forms of hatred and discrimination in esports and video games as opposed to traditional sports is the ability for individuals to mute or block those that harass them. This can happen in ranked games, official matches online, online livestreams, and interactions on social media. It should be noted that this is not forever effective as the real goal of esports competitors in FPS games is to participate and thrive in offline tournaments and events. Whenever women qualify and participate in offline events, the ability to simply mute or block unwanted individuals from interacting with you in-person is no longer possible. Similarly, this research project supports previous work which states that women of all backgrounds and identities come together to create safe spaces for each other online (Poland, 2016, p. 160). Since six out of ten participants specified that they queue up with friends daily instead of playing alone, and several specified that there is always some stranger that makes a bad comment, this claim by Poland is supported. Ybarra et al. similarly found that LGBTQ+ teenagers also feel

safer online in supportive online environments which helps them deal with online victimization (2015, p. 134), and the experiences shared by participants who self-identify as transgender supports this claim too. One further finding that this research unexpectedly found is that sexism, misogyny, and transphobia can get so frequent that majority of the participants mentioned that they avoid using social media or checking previous broadcasts of their matches to avoid inevitable hateful comments. This showcases just how awful the state of hatred is online towards those that compete in women's leagues in esports.

Results from this research affirm what previous literature concludes about opportunities for women in Formula 1 where women face hostility and neglect and are denied opportunities that they would have had if they were men (Howe, 2022, p. 458). Participants in this research shared personal experiences which support this claim, and the amount of barriers discussed in this research project further support this claim. Participant 3 shared a personal experience where she was denied being tried out for teams once they heard her voice, and recalled a time where she showcased that she was “male” on her profile instead of “female” so teams could give her a chance. Surprisingly, when it comes to compensation in esports for women, this research project did not make a clear conclusion and thus does not support previous research in Formula 1 which found that women got way less money and sponsorships (Howe, 2022, p. 461). The researcher anecdotally personally believes that the very best men still make way more money than the very best women in esports, though the opinions of participants were split, thus a conclusion could not be made.

Transphobia is a topic that was rarely covered in previous esports literature. There is extensive research into mistreatment of transgender athletes in traditional sports, though some findings in this project are potentially unique that previous research has not covered. Participants

in this research that self-identified as transgender women all agreed that they know of cisgender women that refuse to play alongside transgender women or believe that such cisgender women exist. One participant that self-identified as “transfem non-binary” also fully agreed that this problem exists, while the other participant that self-identified as such shared that they did not know. Some participants that self-identified as cisgender women also mentioned that they believe such competitors exist. The closest comparison that this finding has to research in traditional sports is that individuals that identify as transgender in traditional sports are discriminated at a greater level than those that identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Cunningham & Pickett, 2018, p. 220). Two participants that self-identified as transgender women in this study shared similar opinions. Participant 7 mentioned that she feels that cisgender women are generally “more respectful than cis men”, while Participant 10 mentioned that people in esports are way more friendly towards “cis women that are LGB” while they are “way more hostile” towards transgender women. The findings of this research support Cunningham & Pickett’s conclusion that individuals who identify as transgender face greater levels of harassment than LGB individuals.

One theme that this research unexpectedly encountered is the controversial topic of “verification” for women’s leagues. Some participants shared that VCT: Game Changers in Valorant saw a lot of drama due to the lack of a proper verification system. Three different participants who self-identified as cisgender, transgender, and non-binary, all raised a concern over the lack of a proper verification system for transgender women and non-binary individuals that wish to compete in Valorant’s women’s league. One participant shared a concern that it may be an issue in CS too, though they were seemingly unaware of a ruling that exists in ESL Impact’s rulebook which specifies that tournament organizers could contact competitors in this

women's league for verification to confirm a player's gender such as a doctor or therapist note (ESL Impact Rules, 2023). In VCT: Game Changers, this rule seemingly does not exist, and participant 10 explained that all an individual needs to be "verified" to play is to have made a post on social media that they began to transition. Since enough bad-faith actors had abused this lax form of verification in VCT: Game Changers, it has likely led to a more hostile attitude towards all competitors in that league who identify as either transgender women or non-binary. The participants that shared a want or need for a more firm and thorough verification system for VCT: Game Changers seemed to do so to protect transgender women and non-binary competitors in the scene, not create an extra barrier of entry for them. They further claimed that they knew other transgender women who also shared their view in private and on social media that this league needs a better verification system.

It is unsurprising that all participants agreed that the creation of separate women's leagues is a net positive for women's esports. It supports previous findings in literature where the creation of such leagues was a result of historical and current attitudes towards women in sports (Howe, 2022). It is also not surprising that all participants agreed that the scene has been heading towards a positive trend, especially when they reflected on what it was like six or ten years ago. The surprising finding that this research produced is that there was a clear divide between how cisgender women and transgender women felt about the future of CS for women when it comes to the places in which women's only events are hosted. It has only been a recent development, though the future 2024 Women's Esports Championship (WEC 2024) will be held in Saudi Arabia. LGBTQ+ women are rightfully afraid of attending said event, even though it would be a lovely opportunity, due to fearing for their own lives. Had these interviews taken place in mid-March rather than mid-February, answers would likely be different from all participants,



cisgender women included, regarding how they felt about the future of women's esports. The head of the Canadian esports federation officially posted on X (formerly Twitter) that they cannot guarantee player safety and that LGBTQ+ women should travel under their own discretion (Mnmzzz, 2024) for this tournament. Even though there is seemingly more funding and more opportunities for women nowadays than it was in the present, is it truly an opportunity if a woman must put her life on the line to earn some money playing a video game and chasing their dream? This research project strongly advises women in esports who identify as LGBTQ+ to not attend any event, regardless of their prestige or prize pool, which are held in places that does not openly welcome them. It is also incredibly hypocritical for an organization such as Esports Canada to flaunt that "Equity, Diversity & Inclusion" is a core value of theirs while they are planning on attending WEC 2024 (Mnmzzz, 2024).

## Conclusion

The goal of this research was to understand how problematic and how rampant hatred in the forms of sexism, misogyny, and transphobia were in esports. It found that it is a huge issue that still leads to women in esports to face harassment and hatred daily and discourages many of them to ever attempt to compete in esports or to eventually end their esports career short. It further uncovered many different barriers to entry that individuals who identify as women face in esports that individuals who identify as men do not. Even though these issues still exist and are a huge problem in esports, at least in FPS titles, they have gotten better over time and the scene is much more welcoming for women in 2024 than it was in just 2018. This research also uncovered a surprising finding where transphobia may exist among some cisgender women who compete in women's leagues in FPS titles. While the implementation of women's leagues in esports is still a new concept in titles such as CS and Valorant, some participants felt that these leagues need to be run much better for more meaningful progress to be made for women's esports. Intersectionality is incredibly important to consider when attempting to understand these problems in esports as the individuals that are most frequently targeted with hatred, discrimination, and harassment, are ones that belong to multiple oppressed groups of people in a male-dominated space that is esports.

## Appendices

### Appendix One – Interview Questions

1. Could you briefly describe your achievements as a gamer and esports competitor? What tournaments or divisions have you competed in?
2. The findings of this project will be influenced by participants' answers depending on how they self-identify. It would compare data between cisgender women and transgender women, as well as between women of different ethnic backgrounds. Could you tell me how you identify your gender?
3. Could you tell me how you identify your sexual orientation?
4. Could you tell me how you describe your ethnicity?
  - a) (If more clarification is needed) How would you like me to refer to your gender/sexual orientation/ethnicity in the study?
5. What would you describe the environment of esports to be like for women and/or women that identify as LGBTQ+?
6. Would you say there are barriers to entry for women in esports?
  - a) If yes, can you think of any experiences that you or someone you know has gone through which has discouraged you or them from playing or competing?
  - b) Are there more or less opportunities for women? Are there enough events and are women that compete compensated adequately when compared to men that compete?
7. How does the reality of competing in esports as a woman compare to what you expected?
8. Do you find the average casual cis-male player to be more negative to you than the more serious cis-male competitive player, even if they are not explicitly targeting you because of your gender or sexual identity?
9. Have you or someone you have known ever taken any steps to minimize the risk of teammates or opponents in games potentially recognizing or assuming that you are a woman?
  - a) If so, what steps have you taken?
  - b) Have you grouped up with people you know to play together instead of solo queueing to avoid "toxicity"?
10. How often do you see comments in pugs (pick-up games), competitive matches, or streams that specifically target you or others you may know for being a woman? How have these targeted comments impacted yourself or others whether inside or outside of esports?
11. What are politics among competitive women-only teams like? Are there cis women that either blatantly refuse to play with trans women or cis women that one may suspect avoid playing with trans women?

12.. Is there any time where a certain comment or interaction you have seen or heard from others really stuck with you for months or years since you have seen it?

13. What are your perceptions/opinions of 'ESL Impact/VCT Game Changers'? In an ideal world, would co-ed teams be the ultimate goal for women that compete in esports?

14. In your opinion, is the esports environment moving towards a more positive or negative direction when it comes to welcoming and including women gamers?

## Appendix Two – Consent Form



### **The Hateful Side of Electronic Sports: Sexism, Misogyny, and Transphobia in a “Man’s Space”**

KPU REB #2023-44

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Petra Jonas, Criminology Professor and Honours Supervisor, (604) XXX-XXXX, [petra.jonas@kpu.ca](mailto:petra.jonas@kpu.ca)

**Co-Investigator:** Filip Mitevski, Honours Student in Criminology, (604) XXX-XXXX, [filip.mitevski@student.kpu.ca](mailto:filip.mitevski@student.kpu.ca)

**Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this research is to explore sexism, misogyny, and transphobia in electronic sports (esports).

**Procedures:** If you choose to participate in the online interview, you will be asked to answer a series of questions regarding sexism, misogyny, and transphobia in esports through Zoom; an online platform. You do need to create a Zoom account to complete the interview. Please sign in on Zoom as a guest to preserve anonymity. The interviews will be recorded and stored safely in a separate, passcode-protected OneDrive that only the principal investigators have access to.

**Duration/Time:** The online interview will take approximately 60 minutes to complete.

**Benefits:** The benefits to you include an opportunity to contribute to research regarding sexism, misogyny, and transphobia in esports in order to identify any prevalent trends that can be explored through future research.

**Statement of Confidentiality:** Participation in this research is voluntary and confidential. The project could only guarantee limited confidentiality due to readers who are familiar with esports still have a chance of identifying you if you discuss certain experiences that have occurred. For example, if you recall an incident from a live competitive esports match from a tournament, readers that have witnessed it

happening live could still recall the players that could have been involved in said experience regardless of how anonymized and coded all information is.

**Privacy:** The researchers will endeavour to protect your anonymity and identity through several measures. Your name will not be associated with your responses, and an ID code will be assigned to you. The information you provide will be stored on a password-protected computer. Your in-game aliases would not be linked to your answers or your real names in the project. Your data would simply be discussed with names anonymized names such as “Participant 1”, “Participant 2”, and “played on Team A during Tournament B” which would be the names used when describing certain occurrences in the “findings” of the project. Dates would not be used and specifics would be left out unless they are directly related to the themes of this project. E.g. the project would discuss an opponent being sexist or transphobic during a game, though it would not mention unnecessary personal identifying information for any individual involved.

**Data Security:** Your interview data will remain secure and confidential throughout the whole study and deleted upon completion of the project. The data that would be collected would only be the answers you provide during the questions in the recorded interview that takes place. This data could be used in the “findings” section of this project. The principal investigator will grant access to a participant wanting to view the “findings” section of this project to the shared folders.

**Risk:** When utilizing a third-party platform, such as Zoom, there is always a risk of potential confidentiality breaches and risks in data security. Researchers will store data locally as soon as it is collected to mitigate this risk. There may be moments when this research becomes sensitive. If you feel that a question(s) triggers negative emotional or psychological feelings, you may contact a counsellor near you, or access free counselling through 310-Mental Health Support.

310- Mental Health Support: 310-6789 (No area code needed)

Call 1-800-784-2433 for 24/7 support if you are in distress.

Other sources:

For Canadian participants:

- 1) Call 1-833-456-4566 for 24/7 support within Canada (outside of Quebec).
- 2) Call 1-866-277-3553 for 24/7 support within Quebec.
- 3) Call 310-6789 for the BC Mental Health Support Line (24/7 and free).

For U.S. participants:

- 1) Text HOME to 741741 to reach a volunteer Crisis Counselor.
- 2) Call 1-800-985-5990 to talk with trained crisis workers that will assist with your needs and direct you to the resources you may need.
- 3) Call 988 or access a live chat with a support worker on <https://988lifeline.org/>.

Further support for 2SLGBTQ+ individuals:

- 1) Call 1-866-488-7386 or visit <https://thetrevorproject.org/get-help/> to reach “The Trevor Project”.
- 2) Visit <https://www.saravyc.ubc.ca/resources/british-columbia/> for a list of 2SLGBTQ+-friendly crisis lines.

If you have any questions right now, please ask them. If you have questions later, you can contact Petra Jonas at [petra.jonas@kpu.ca](mailto:petra.jonas@kpu.ca) or Filip Mitevski by email at [filip.mitevski@student.kpu.ca](mailto:filip.mitevski@student.kpu.ca). If you are interested in knowing the results of this study, do not hesitate to contact the research investigators.

If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the KPU Research Ethics Board at [reb@kpu.ca](mailto:reb@kpu.ca) or 604-599-3163.

**Follow-up Questions and Results:** There is a chance that you may be contacted with quick follow-up questions with a message after the interview has completed. You could also receive the results and findings of this research project after those sections are completed if you wish.

**Compensation:** Participants will be compensated for their time with a \$US 25 Amazon gift card which would be emailed to them after the completion of the project. Participants would then be asked to kindly inform either the principal investigator or co-investigator that they successfully received their compensation. Even if you withdraw from the study, you will still be entitled to keep this compensation for your time. The funding source for the compensation of this project is Kwantlen Polytechnic University’s “Student Research and Innovation Grant”, under file-number “KPU-SRIG 2023-28”.

**Right to Withdraw:** If you feel uncomfortable with any part of the interview, you can withdraw your participation at any time, without consequence, until the end date of this project (April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2024). You also do not have to answer questions that you do not feel comfortable answering. To withdraw, you would have to notify either the principal investigator or co-investigator that you wish to withdraw. This could be done verbally during or after the interview, over a text message through the platform you initially made contact with either the principal investigator or co-investigator, or through a phone call with either individual. Once you withdraw from this study, all of your data will be immediately destroyed (all files will be deleted from the OneDrives they were stored in) and it will not be used towards the findings of this project.

By consenting to participate in your research project, you have not waived your rights to legal recourse in the event of research-related harm.

I have read the above information regarding this project exploring sexism, misogyny, and transphobia in esports and consent to participate in this study.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_



### **Appendix Three – Recruitment Poster**

The social media posts on sites like “X.com” that targeted potential participants were the following:

“Hey Twitter, if you identify as a woman and have a competitive esports history, please DM me on here or on my steam account (Feedalee) if you would be interested in participating in my research project! My supervisor for this project is Dr. Petra Jonas, a Criminology Professor at Kwantlen Polytechnic University. There is compensation included which is a US\$25 Amazon gift card for up to an hour of your time. KPU REB #2023-44”

Initial contact with potential participants via a direct message through a gaming platform such as Steam were:

“Hey [username of potential participant]! I’m reaching out to you to ask whether you would be willing to participate in research I am conducting that covers sexism, misogyny, and transphobia in esports. I intend to interview individuals that identify as women and compete or have competed in esports to share their experiences with me. I’m a former competitor that has played for over 4 years, most notably briefly participating in both ESEA MDL/Premier and FPL. I have always described myself as a feminist who wants equality for all people regardless of how they identify, and from my experience of playing the game I love I know how common hateful views are among competitive and casual players. Would you be interested in discussing this more and participating in an interview in the future? Thank you very much for your time. My supervisor for this project is Dr. Petra Jonas, a Criminology Professor at Kwantlen Polytechnic University. There is compensation included which is a US\$25 Amazon gift card for up to an hour of your time. KPU REB #2023-44”

The research project covers sexism, misogyny, and transphobia in esports. I have always described myself as a feminist who wants equality for all people regardless of how they identify, and from my experience of playing the game I love I know how common hateful views are among competitive and casual players. The topic of transphobia is very central to this project.

I did not create physical posters for this project. I have been apart of all relevant “gaming clubs” at KPU for about two years now and have talked to students that are very into collegiate gaming and passionately play daily. None of them would fit the criteria of this project. From talking to so many students that are into esports at our university, none of them have come close to meeting all of the purposive criteria set by this project. I have been to some gaming-related school events where people have shared their accounts to meet other people to play with, and once again, no one has come close to meeting the criteria. The chances of someone slipping through the cracks when I have previously tried to find competitive esports players on campus is extremely slim.

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