



**Exploring Inclusivity and Gender-Based Toxicity  
within Esports: A Study into Valorant and Game  
Changers**

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation looks at the contents of inclusivity and toxicity within the esports industry, focusing particularly on initiatives like Valorant Game Changers that aim to promote diversity in competitive gaming cultures. The research investigates how gender disparities, toxicity, and cultural stigmas affect the participation and recognition of marginalised groups in high-level gaming, with the focus on female and non-binary players. Using a critical and interpretive approach, the research conducted utilises a mix of academic studies on gender studies, social studies, news reports, and data based on gender bias, online harassment, and cultural stereotypes that shape the esports scene.

The study finds that esports and gaming cultures have mirrored wider social inequalities that have been observed in society for decades, from the sexualisation of women to the normalisation of toxic behaviours. While projects and initiatives like Game Changers are making the first steps to create safer and more inclusive environments for minorities, outside of these safe spaces, the same problems persist.

Ultimately, the research shows that these changes are happening to better the esports industry, but the results take time to prove how much impact they make. Real progress is the reward of the eventual shift in cultural views naturally, not just by adding diversity, equity, and inclusive initiatives. If the esports industry continues to move in this direction, competitive gaming can become a space where everyone, regardless of differences or backgrounds, have a chance to thrive.

## **Table of Contents**

Abstract .....	2
Introduction.....	5
Literature Review.....	6
The Rise of Esports & Online Media Consumption .....	6
Wu <i>et al.</i> , (2010) Uses and Gratification Theory Study .....	6
The Role of Riot Games in Esports .....	8
Valorant & the Emergence of Game Changers .....	8
Women in Games Argentina Case Study in Valorant.....	9
Case Study on Game Changers & Comparative Inclusion Initiatives .....	9
Understanding Toxicity in Online Gaming Spaces.....	11
Developer and Community Responses to Toxicity .....	11
Methodology .....	12
Research Paradigm: Interpretivism, Critical Theory, & Epistemology .....	12
Research Design.....	13
Case Study Approach.....	13
Limitations .....	14
Findings.....	14
Patterns of Inclusivity in Esports .....	14
Patterns of Toxicity in Esports .....	16
Interrelation Between Inclusivity & Toxicity .....	17
Sustainability and Structural Barriers .....	17
Summary of Key Findings .....	18
Implications for Future Research & Practices .....	18
Discussion .....	19
Structural Barriers and the Illusion of Inclusion.....	19
Cultural Legitimacy and the Cyclical Toxicity Loop.....	19
Sexualisation and Representation in Gaming Culture .....	20
Corporate Inclusion versus Community Empowerment.....	21
Conceptual Framework for Change .....	21
Conclusion .....	22
References.....	24
Appendices.....	28



## **Introduction**

Esports, seen as a “form of sports where the primary aspects of the sport are facilitated by electronic systems” (Hamari, J., & Sjöblom, M., 2017), is a fast-paced growing industry that is still referred to as in its “infancy stage” (Cranmer et al., 2021). This transformation has repositioned online gaming from a leisure-oriented pastime to a global competitive phenomenon in multiple countries – receiving substantial investment and sponsorships from both endemic and non-endemic brands – hosting tournaments with prize pools comparable to those in traditional sports. Among the most prominent esports titles contributing to this evolution of online gaming is Valorant, a tactical first-person-shooter developed by Riot Games, which has established itself as a top esports title since its release in 2020.

Within the Valorant ecosystem, the Game Changers initiative that launched in 2021 aims to foster talent and represent women and marginalised genders in an inclusive competitive platform (Riot Games, 2021). Designed to address gender disparity in esports, Game Changers represents an attempt to transform the traditionally male-dominated competitive gaming space (Rogstad, E. T., 2021). However, this initiative has faced a global challenge against toxicity within the Valorant community.

While the growth of esports has developed global innovation, engagement, and economic opportunities, it has also exposed the longstanding behavioural issues within the video game community. Among these is the prevalence of toxic behaviour, harassment, verbal abuse, and discriminative conduct. Such toxicity is pervasive in competitive environments, where the intensity of gameplay and anonymity in online communication creates a fertile ground for these negative interactions. As esports continues to expand, the implications of this behaviour become more pronounced as not only does it affect player reputation, but it also affects teams, organisations, industry reputation, and the sustainability of esports.

This dissertation aims to critically analyse the relationship between the growth of the esports industry and the persistence of toxic behaviours within its ecosystems, particularly within inclusive scenes. It seeks to understand how Riot Games attempts to create a more inclusive competitive environment and how they respond to the culture of toxic behaviour within the online space. Part of this research is the question on whether inclusion initiatives can provide a positive impact to an online community, where it can counteract exclusion and hostility, or whether they risk becoming an isolated scene where there is no significant impact.

To address these questions, this thesis adopts a multidisciplinary approach, utilising literature from research papers, game studies, gender studies, and digital sociology. This methodological framework allows for an in-depth study of how Game Changers participants may experience competitive play, and how structural and cultural barriers manifest in an inclusive context. As Valorant continues to grow in player base, the success of the Game Changers initiative will be critical in shaping the sustainability of inclusive esports for other titles.

## **Literature Review**

As competitive gaming continues to evolve into a globally cultural space with various commercial opportunities, it brings both possibilities and challenges. While titles such as Valorant offer highly structured experiences that promote high-level competition across four different regions worldwide, toxicity is embedded in gaming culture, meaning that this new title can reproduce the same exclusionary and toxic behaviours that we have previously seen in older esports titles. This review aims to assess existing scholarly and industry literature on the development of esports and its relationship of toxicity, if whether similar initiatives in other games have worked at fostering inclusivity, especially for women and marginalised genders.

### **The Rise of Esports & Online Media Consumption**

The past few decades have witnessed the transformation of esports from grassroots gaming communities into a professional and commercialised industry. Video games have “exponentially evolved from their basement laboratory ancestral roots” as it originally begun as a “friendly split-screen match between friends, as quests for an arcade high score” (Migliore, L., 2021). The legitimisation of esports has been bolstered by increasing institutional investment, as organisations such as ESL and Intel Extreme Masters (IEM) “filled the void” and “certain professionalisation was slowly emerging, making these organisations interesting for investment” (Scholz, T. M., 2019); moreover, South-Korean businesses found that sponsorships of “professional computer gaming” was seen as a “good investment” as it often cited “return-on-investment ratios of 500%” (Taylor, T. L., 2012).

### **Wu *et al.*, (2010) Uses and Gratification Theory Study**

To understand why people indulge in media consumption, we can utilise the uses and gratification theory (UGT) framework to analyse media consumption in esports (Katz *et al.*, 1973, 1974; Wang *et al.*, 2008; West, R., & Turner, L. H., 2018). Wu *et al.*, (2010) conducted research into the gratification of online gaming using the UGT model, and using the conceptual model depicted in Figure 1, with a questionnaire that garnered 343 responses (excluding six responses due to construct validity) using netizens who played online games in Taiwan – where majority of the population were students.

The questionnaire consisted of three sections, the first section providing instructions and the definition of online games. The second section gathered demographic information of the subjects, such as “gender, age, highest educational level achieved, seniority, frequency of playing online games and the number of different online games the subject played and the game models (i.e. pay-to-play model or free-to-play model)”. The last section recorded the subject’s “perception of each variable in the model” using a Likert-scale.

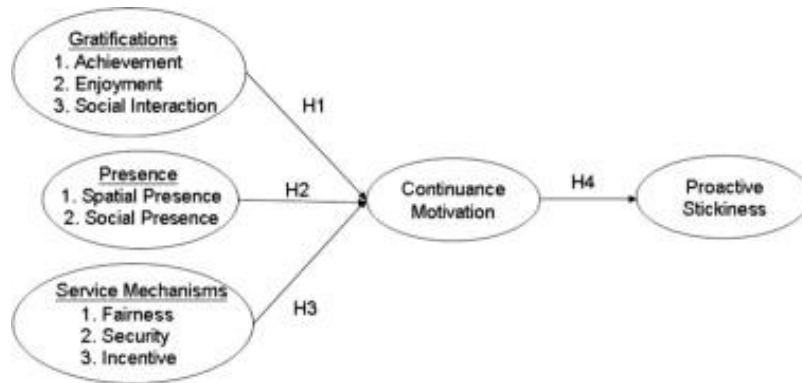


Figure 1 - Wu et al., 2010 UGT Structural Model

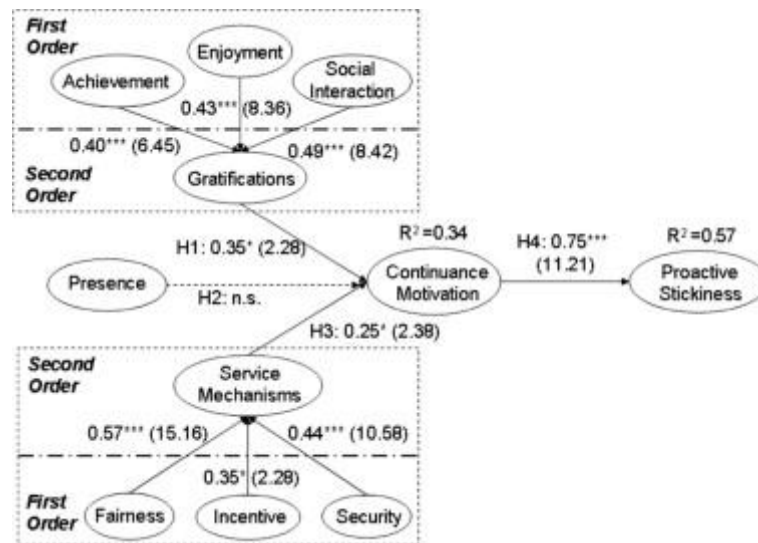


Figure 2 - The Empirical Results from the Questionnaire (Wu et al., 2010)

Wu *et al.*, created hypotheses for each section of the questionnaire as proposed:

**H1** – Players’ initial gratification (trial) experiences in playing an online game will positively affect their continuance motivation to play the online game.

**H2** – Presence (i.e. spatial presence and social presence) of an online game will positively affect players’ continuance motivation to play the online game.

**H3** – Service mechanisms offered by online game publishers will positively affect players’ continuance motivation to play the online game.

**H4** – Players’ continuance motivation will positively affect their proactive stickiness to the online game.

Using Figure 2, these present a graphical depiction of the questionnaire results; as Wu *et al.*, hypothesised, the “paths from gratifications (H1) and service mechanisms (H3) to continuance motivation were found to be positive and significant”, where proving that the hypothesis for H4 meant that continuance motivation has “strong significant and positive effect on stickiness”. The conclusion of this study is that online games are regarded as a kind of media where the questions asked were able to provide insights into the factors affecting “players’ proactive stickiness to a specific online game” within Taiwan.

Using the research from Wu *et al.*, and previous studies using UGT (Katz *et al.*, 1973, 1974; Wang *et al.*, 2008; West, R., & Turner, L. H., 2018), we are able to understand that online games have different aspects that maintain retention to audiences involved in digital media. These findings are also able to help with contributing online communities through theoretical development as game developers are part of the reason why games “stick” to audiences and how to solve any issues within the online space.

### **The Role of Riot Games in Esports**

Riot Games has played a significant role in the evolution of esports, first through League of Legends and now through the latest release of Valorant. These titles are not only games, but also platforms for media production, brand sponsorships, and engagement from audiences. League of Legends is a predominant title in the esports space, where it is ranked 7<sup>th</sup> place based on monthly active users (MAU) and Valorant is placed 9<sup>th</sup> place based on MAU in March 2025 (Newzoo, 2025).

There are two esports’ models in the world, the first model is the Riot Model, where the publisher has “absolute control over almost everything”; whereas the second model, the Valve Model, is defined because the “publisher is less involved in the exploitation and entrusts an organiser to exploit the game competitively” (Saiz-Alvares *et al.*, 2021). Both of these models are result of a unique business model that is an extension of “sport” but has evolved due to the “popularisation of the Internet and the advancement of digital media technology”; this means that there are no “geographical and physical constraints faced by traditional sports” (Sun, J., 2024).

Riot Games runs its own “worldwide league for its game”, and “handles event and media production in-house, utilising crews with experience in traditional sports as well as gaming” (Taylor, T. L., 2016), therefore, the esports ecosystem is handled all under the corporate umbrella. By maintaining direct control over their competitive scenes, Riot are able to regulate rules, keep consistent branding when broadcasting, and maintain viewership and experience while watching. This distinct “level of control” that Riot maintains over each game and the “derivative aspects of the contests in esports” may help other developers and leagues to operate differently within the “‘unique’ sport industry” (Holden *et al.*, 2017). As Valorant positions itself alongside legacy titles such as Counter-Strike, Riot’s influence continues to shape the future of esports.

### **Valorant & the Emergence of Game Changers**

Valorant quickly established itself as a major competitive first-person-shooter (FPS), designed with esports scalability in mind. Using the game mechanics, hero-based roles and abilities, and emphasis on team coordination, it offers a unique experience for spectators and players. However, the esports scene is extremely male-dominated, with limited opportunities for marginalised genders – as the traits associated with the ideal “competent esports athlete” are those of a young, white, cisgender, assumedly heterosexual man who is isolated and hunched in a dark basement space (Witowski, E., 2018; Paaßen *et al.*, 2016).



In response to this, Riot launched the Game Changers initiative in 2021, creating a competitive circuit specifically for women and other marginalised genders within esports. According to Riot, the goal was to create more “opportunities to compete at the semi-pro and grassroots level” (Rozelle, W., 2021), this helps expose the talents of marginalised genders and addresses systemic barriers such as harassment, underrepresentation, and lack of institutional support.

Academic perspectives on such initiatives remain divided as “while revolutionary in its focus” it was “not without blindspots” (Richard, G., & Gray, K., 2018), as there may be ways in which communities “might resist, redefine, or otherwise reproduce the lingering masculinist gaze and logics of online gamespaces” (Woods, O., 2021). While Game Changers offers a safe space for competition and visibility, “overt competition” is discouraged and publishers and participants can also “be punished by social ostracism and shunning” (Bertozi, E., 2008) as previous examples of inclusivity in gaming “invoked traditional stereotypes” and “did not wholly address the role of physical and social barriers to play” (Woods, O., 2021; Richard, G., & Gray, K., 2018). Nevertheless, players and the community have praised the Game Changers initiative for creating a platform for growth, confidence-building, and representation.

### **Women in Games Argentina Case Study in Valorant**

The initiative ‘Women in Games’ undertook a study to examine the experience of female gamers compared to males using Valorant. This entailed a number of Argentinian streamers playing Valorant – with five games utilising their own voice, and another five games using a voice changer to sound female-presenting. By playing five games each with their own voice and five with a voice changer, the researchers ensured internal validity to increase the reliability of the results. Internal validity is the degree to which a study establishes the cause-and-effect relationship between the treatment and the observed outcome” (Slack, M. K., & Draugalis, J. R., 2001).

When the streamers played without the voice changer, they were able to achieve a high KD ratio and experienced no sexism or toxicity when using the in-game voice chat function. However, when they used the voice chat function with a voice changer, they were faced with a barrage of slurs and stereotypical, misogynistic insults – with the other players on their team grieving as they were playing a “man’s game”. This resulted in the streamers having an overall negative KD ratio at the end of their games. The streamers reported afterwards that they could not imagine having to experience these issues every day as it is demotivating. This highlights the cause-and-effect relationship between gender, specifically female-presenting, and toxicity within the gaming community.

### **Case Study on Game Changers & Comparative Inclusion Initiatives**

The Game Changers initiative represents a significant case study for how targeted interventions can create opportunities for women and other marginalised genders within competitive gaming ecosystems. Since it was implemented, Game Changers has produced

noticeable results and outcomes, such as the elevated visibility, increased sponsorship deals, and the introduction of talent entering broader Valorant competitive play. A notable example of this includes ‘Shopify Rebellion’ (SR), previously known as ‘Version1’, a fully female roster who has successfully gained mainstream sponsorships from Razer, a popular gaming peripherals brand that recorded a revenue of over \$1.6 billion in 2021 (Stelzner, M., 2021), and Moist Esports, an esports organisation co-created by popular Twitch streamers MoistCr1tikal and Ludwig, and media coverage (Shopify Rebellion, 2025).

One instance of success from SR was coming 2<sup>nd</sup> place versus G2 Gozen in the VCT GC 2022 World Championships, this was the last tournament in the VCT 2022 season and garnered so much attention that it became the most watched tournament in female esports history with a peak of 239,334 viewers (Ahmed, A., 2022; Esports Charts, 2022). Ever since 2022, SR has won 1<sup>st</sup> place in the VCT GC Championships for two consecutive years in a row (VLR, 2025) – where one of the players, ‘Florescent’, graduated from her position and was signed to Norwegian esports organisation, ‘Apeks’, to compete in the VCT EMEA circuit (Grannes, E., 2024). Moreover, SR became the first Game Changers team to qualify for VCT Challengers in the world (Maas, L., 2025).

In highlight of Game Changers, other esports titles have developed similar initiatives aimed at increasing representation, such as Blizzard Entertainment’s ‘Calling All Heroes’ (CAH) initiative in ‘Overwatch’. Blizzard’s project started a year after Game Changers, in 2022, and it includes both a ‘Challenger’ and ‘Rising’ (now known as Raidiant Academy) series – where the Raidiant CAH Rising series is for “marginalised gender participants ranked Diamond or below” and the ‘Challenger’ series is for anyone Master or above (Raidiant, 2024; 2025).

Similarly, Counter-Strike has seen the emergence of separate women’s leagues, such as the ESL Impact League in 2022. However, this tournament series only provides a platform for women and not marginalised genders but still offers exposure and alleyways for players to seek professional coaching. Despite the league’s success in offering a safe competitive space for women, it has been under criticism by people inside and outside the community – an example of this is ‘Semmler’, a Counter-Strike caster and content creator, who made a comment on YouTube saying "I'm afraid that you've been misled into believing that men can become women and vice versa. Men should not be competing in a female league.". Many fans were upset at Semmler’s comments online and he continued to confirm his beliefs with an X post (formerly known as Twitter) and continued to make comments such as “a men’s only league” should be created (Dust2, 2022).

There are also initiatives for games such as ‘Rainbow Six Siege’ where they created the ‘Women’s League’ and ‘Project Harmony’ for regions worldwide to address the barriers of women entering the competitive scene. What these comparative case studies collectively reveal is that while targeted tournament initiatives can foster community development, exposed visibility, and skills progression, their transformative potential is reliant on several factors. This can be needing long-term cultural shifts, as a lot of toxicity comes from the cultural hegemonic traits from sport and linguistic profiling of real-time voice chat (Taylor, T. L., 2008; Gray, K., 2011). Other factors will be the reliance of sustained investment from Riot

Games, endemic and non-endemic brands, and instrumental support in and out of gameplay as teams require complex support to help efficiency and success (Freeman, G., & Wohn, D., 2017).

In the case of Game Changers, Riot Games has demonstrated a comparatively holistic model against other inclusivity projects, the introduction of being one of the first publishers to develop a competitive circuit for both women and other marginalised genders, and public commitments to maintaining moderation and inclusivity standards. In 2024, Riot made some changes that allowed some eligible Game Changers teams with invites to the Challengers series, a higher division where Tier 2 teams fight to enter Tier 1. This helps transition GC players into mixed-gender competitions to promote inclusivity within leagues (Yurk, R., 2024).

Therefore, inclusion initiatives must be evaluated on their structural impact within the circuit and broader esports ecosystems, not through other datasets such as participation rates or media coverage – this includes managing recruitment practices, regulation of rules, player sustainability, and audience perception.

### **Understanding Toxicity in Online Gaming Spaces**

Toxicity refers to behaviours such as verbal abuse, harassment, griefing, and exclusion, often exacerbated in competitive online environments. This online phenomenon has a term called the ‘disinhibition effect’, where six factors contribute to as to why some people may act out online more “frequently or intensely than they would in person” (Suler, J., 2004). These factors include invisibility, dissociative anonymity, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination, and minimisation of authority. However, the online disinhibition effect is not the only factor that determines how people act in cyberspace, toxicity can vary based on identity factors, such as gender, sexual preference, race, and ethnicity (Suler, J., 2004; Goyal *et al.*, 2022).

Gendered and racial harassment remains a prominent barrier within online spaces and esports communities (ADL, 2021). This is still an issue regarding inclusivity projects due to the sociological and structural limitations within esports, “women are often marginalised in terms of their access to communities through which they might develop their skills” (Taylor, T. L., 2008) – where in extreme cases the “gender-based discrimination may lead women to withdraw from participating in gaming” (Ruvalcaba *et al.*, 2018). In games like Valorant, where voice communication is critical for team coordination, harassment severely impairs competitive performance and career progression for women and marginalised genders – this is a consequence of a hostile and sexist gaming environment, and it can force individuals into “silent participation rather than active engagement” (Fox, J., & Tang, W., 2014).

### **Developer and Community Responses to Toxicity**

Recognising the damage toxicity causes within a community, Riot Games implemented measures such as using AI-driven voice moderation, report systems, and stricter punishments

for abusive behaviours. During 2022, Riot Games and Ubisoft partnered up to develop a database with the aim of gathering in-game data to train the AI moderation tools that can help “detect and mitigate disruptive behaviour in-game” which was implemented in both League of Legends and Valorant (Riot Games, 2022). However, this may not be enough to combat toxicity within an online space, AI is still undergoing machine-learning on many platforms so results may be inconsistent (Seering *et al.*, 2017).

Despite this, enforcement inconsistencies will remain an issue as the persistence of creating new accounts online or ‘smurfing’ in games (experienced players creating new accounts to evade bans) continues to challenge moderation efforts across every online title.

## **Methodology**

This chapter outlines the methodological approach that has been employed to investigate inclusivity initiatives and experiences of toxicity online and in Valorant, with a specific focus on Riot Games’ Game Changers programme. Given the lack of primary data collection in the area of Game Changers, this research is grounded in the analysis of secondary sources including academic literature in social and gender studies, industry reports, and similar case studies – synthesising existing knowledge and providing a critical evaluation of the key challenges and developments in esports inclusivity. This research aims to explore how these initiatives shape participation among women and other marginalised genders, and to assess the effectiveness of responses to online toxicity within a community and the publisher.

### **Research Paradigm: Interpretivism, Critical Theory, & Epistemology**

The methodology used adopts an integrated framework that combines both interpretivism and critical theory with an epistemological viewpoint, when all used together it allows for a critical exploration of inclusivity initiatives in esports.

Interpretivism focuses on understanding subjective experiences and meanings from individuals. This paradigm believes in ‘socially constructed multiple realities’, where truth and reality are created and not discovered (Gall *et al.*, 2003). External realities are contaminated by worldviews, concepts, and different backgrounds from outsiders (Rehman, A. A., & Alharthi, K., 2016), where in the case of esports, it aligns itself with how the goal of this dissertation is to uncover how gender norms, toxicity, and identity are navigated through digital gaming environments.

In addition to interpretivism, critical theory provides an insight into systemic inequalities and power dynamics that are embedded in esports culture (Gall *et al.*, 2003). Critical theory and research are not to explain or understand society, but to change it (Patton, M. Q., 2002); by using this, we are able to investigate whether inclusivity trends genuinely promote social equity or if it is part of their corporate social responsibility guidelines.

By including an epistemology perspective, which refers to the “brand of philosophy that studies the nature of knowledge and the process by which knowledge is acquired and

validated” (Gall *et al.*, 2003), it proposes that knowledge is socially constructed through interaction and interpretation. This view aligns closely with both interpretivism and critical theory as it delves into the truths of “how things really are” and “how things really work”, emphasising that researchers should try to understand the context of these truths (Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S., 1994). This approach then supports the dissertation’s objective to examine how inclusivity initiatives are understood, communicated, and experienced across different layers of the esports ecosystem.

## **Research Design**

The research design utilises qualitative (and some quantitative), secondary data by drawing upon existing literature and publicly accessible data. This method is appropriate for addressing the dissertation’s objectives without direct primary data collection; a broad range of secondary data sources are collated to analyse different areas within the esports industry, particularly looking into practices around diversity and inclusion.

Key data sources include:

- Peer-reviewed journals, studies, and articles on gender, representation, and harassment in gaming environments.
- Online esports news sources, such as Esports Insider.
- Industry reports detailing demographic trends and corporate inclusivity efforts.
- Official announcements and documents from Riot Games and other esports organisations.

The research conducted incorporates thematic analysis to identify patterns across the data collected (Braun, V., & Clarke, V., 2006). This method supports the interpretivist approach by studying multiple realities within esports, and critical theory guides the research of these themes in relation to systemic marginalisation.

## **Case Study Approach**

Approaching different case studies further supports the qualitative methodology, offering an in-depth exploration of diversity and inclusivity initiatives within esports, with Valorant Game Changers as the primary subject of this thesis. This initiative by Riot Games aims to provide structured opportunities and safer competitive spaces for women and other marginalised genders. Additional comparative cases that have been introduced in esports are the ESL Impact League (Counter-Strike), which offers women-only competitive circuits and both of the ‘Women in Esports’ and ‘Women in Games’ movements promote industry-wide gender inclusivity.

Each case study is analysed in the terms of their objectives and structure, if there are different leagues or further steps for participants. They are also analysed in how the initiatives are implemented into the esports ecosystem and the reception by both the community and the media. These case studies can help provide insights into the potential and limitations of esports inclusivity initiatives.

## **Limitations**

This dissertation is limited by its reliance on secondary data. Without primary data, this could be in the form of interview answers from participants or tournament organisers, the analysis may overlook experiential details. Additionally, secondary sources may inherit biases from the writer or article, this could be through social desirability, conformity, gender, or conformation biases. By using an interpretive stance, research results will inevitably be shaped through the materials used, aligning with the chosen research paradigm that values subjectivity as part of understanding these complex social issues of toxicity within esports.

## **Findings**

This chapter presents the key findings in a comprehensive analysis of secondary data sources concerning gender studies, diversity and inclusivity frameworks, and toxicity within the esports industry. Using academic literature, industry reports, and media articles, this analysis will aim to identify prevailing patterns and the effectiveness of these current interventions in esports. Therefore, this section is organised thematically (Braun, V., & Clarke, V., 2006), as it helps build a structure to reflect the complex interplay between esports, toxicity, and inclusivity initiatives.

### **Patterns of Inclusivity in Esports**

Despite the growing popularity of esports worldwide, gender disparities remain prevalent as it is still a male-dominated industry (Rogstad, E. T., 2021). Women and other marginalised genders are significantly underrepresented in character design, professional play, and leadership roles within both video games and esports organisations. However, women and marginalised genders are not the only victims of toxicity online, as seen in Figure 3, ethnic minorities also feel unwelcome in gaming communities due to the prevalence of racism. This underrepresentation correlates to the combination of societal stereotypes, lack of role models in the industry, and toxic communities.

## 1 in 3 Gamers Have Not Felt Welcome in Gaming Communities

And is more pronounced among underrepresented groups, in particular those who identify as ethnic minority and LGBTQIA+

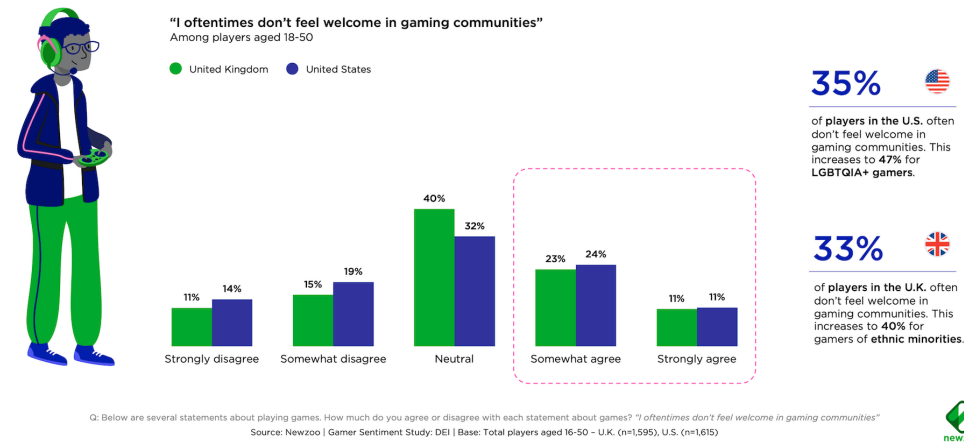


Figure 3 – Infographic of Lack of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Gaming Communities (Newzoo, 2022)

Several initiatives have been created in order to address these issues, such as the focus of this paper on 'Game Changers'. Other video game publishers followed in footsteps to Riot Games and other esports titles have adopted inclusivity initiatives after 2021, such as ESL Impact and Calling All Heroes. In collegiate esports, there are programs that give female and non-binary students the opportunity to compete in an inclusive league, examples of this are 'NUEL' and 'NSE' in the United Kingdom. In Figure 4, data was collected during 2021 and 2022 about the diversity within collegiate esports in North America. The dark blue represents 2021 data, and the lighter blue represents 2022 data, where we can analyse that there was an increase in each category during 2022 compared to the 2021 data.

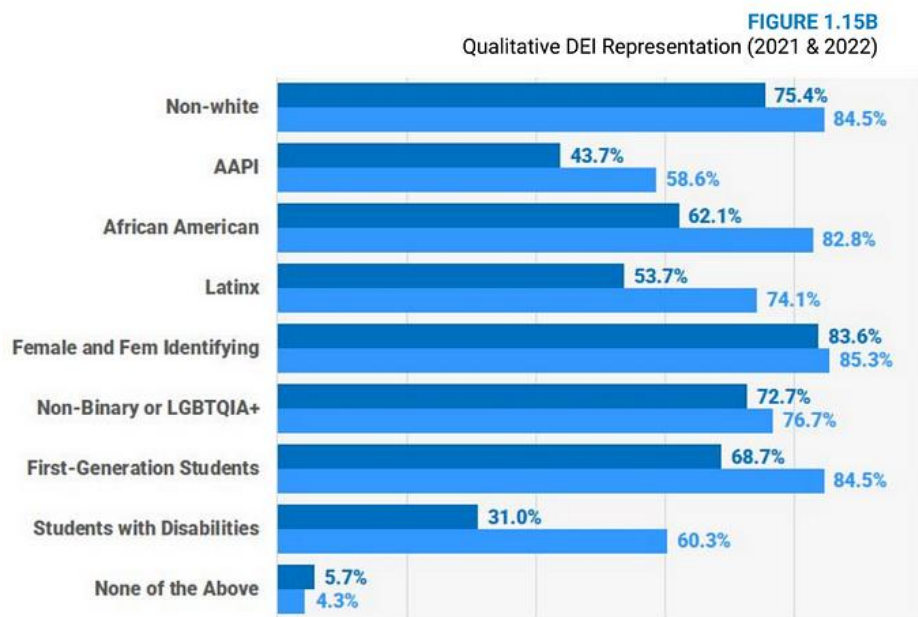


Figure 4 - Bar Chart of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Rates in Collegiate Esports (Kennedy, C., 2023)

Regarding gender representation, there have been some publishers that have listened to the community and added characters with different gender identities, this has been seen in Valorant and Apex Legends. However, the effectiveness of these initiatives varies as there are different laws in each country which may limit how inclusive a project is, or tournament organisers are susceptible to smurfs who falsify their identity to participate.

## **Patterns of Toxicity in Esports**

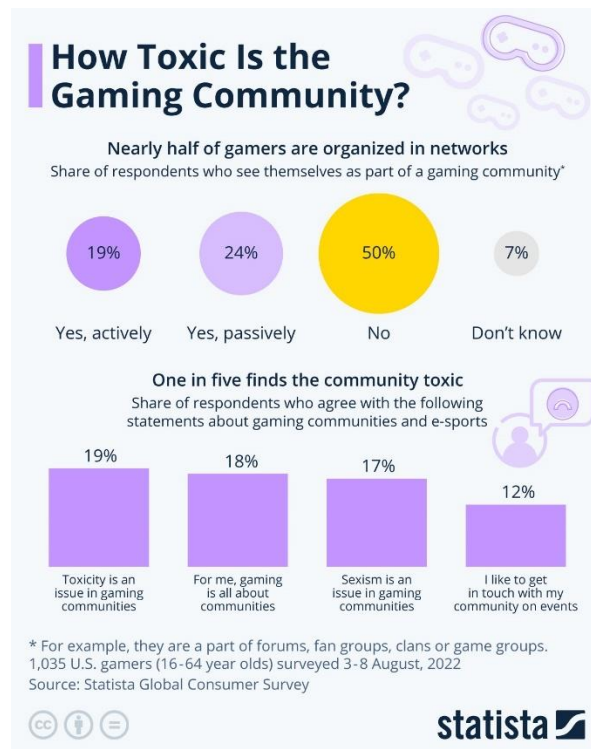


Figure 5 - "How Toxic is the Gaming Community?" Infographic (Statista, 2022)

Toxic behaviours are very prevalent in esports and online spaces – where one in five finds the community toxic (Figure 5) – these issues manifest into harassment, hate speech, and may exclude minorities online. Using studies from Taylor, T. L., (2012) and Goyal *et al.*, (2022), majority of the online esports space is male-dominated and hegemonic masculinity is part of the reason why toxicity exists in this space. Other studies indicate that such behaviours are not only common but also normalised within gaming communities. This normalisation contributes to a hostile environment, where social desirability bias may be a factor in this as people want to fit in with others, even if it is against their own beliefs.

Gaming can be “utterly misogynistic, not to mention homophobic” from teenage boys on FPS games shouting slurs at other players, these slurs are followed by “racial epithets” and encourage exclusion within the gaming space (Taylor, T. L., 2012). Therefore, we see minorities, women, and marginalised genders withdrawing from the gaming and esports spaces in order to avoid facing harassment.

Moreover, those who are exposed to toxic environments will experience detrimental effects on players’ mental health and overall engagement with the industry. Victims of harassment



often experience stress, burnout, anxiety, and potentially depression (Kegelaers *et al.*, 2024). Women often report that they mute themselves in voice chat to avoid targeted harassment, limiting their ability to play (Ruvalcaba *et al.*, 2018). This negativity undermines efforts to diversify the esports community and accentuates existing issues.

### **Interrelation Between Inclusivity & Toxicity**

A critical finding across the research papers used is that there is a cyclical relationship between the lack of inclusivity and prevalence of toxicity online. When entering environments with little demographic diversity, there are often norms that marginalise and exclude groups, this has meant there has been an absence of role models for minorities and the lack of systemic support discourages those who want to enter esports.

This cycle is particularly evident in the case of Valorant, where despite the implementation of Game Changers, the circuit still lacks gender diversity within the EMEA (Europe, the Middle East and Africa) region. The Americas, China, and APAC (Asia and Pacific) regions allow for both women, non-binary, and other marginalised players to compete. However, in the EMEA region, non-binary and other marginalised genders players have been banned from competing due to legal and safety reasons, as Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates enforce laws to punish those who are transgender or other LGBTQIA+ identities (Scharnagle, J., 2021). This lack of diversity has been under criticism as Game Changers is an initiative that claimed to promote other marginalised genders.

To help reduce toxicity within gameplay, Riot Games and other publishers have tried to intervene and minimise risk by implementing AI moderation tools, behavioural policies, and a report system. Despite this, the effectiveness of these interventions has faced mixed results. The Vanguard anti-cheat system and AI voice moderation tools have signalled that Riot aims to prevent in-game abuse; however, AI is still at an early stage and still machine learning, and Vanguard may not be able to consistently detect cheats.

### **Sustainability and Structural Barriers**

Despite the growth of diversity-focused tournaments, the findings highlight several barriers that inhibit sustainability and mainstream integration. First of all, there are resource disparities between inclusivity leagues and main leagues – prize pools and sponsorships for women and marginalised gender tournaments are often significantly smaller than a ‘male-dominated’ equivalent. An example of this is during both 2024 VCT Championships, the Game Changers prize pool was \$500,000, whereas the main Championships series had a total prize pool of \$2,250,000 despite having the same sponsors (Liquipedia, 2025).

Another issue that affects sustainability is that some parts of the Valorant community perceive the Game Changers initiative as less competitive, or less skill-based. This perception gap is a barrier within the esports industry as the negative gender norm that women play ‘worse’ than men is a prevalent opinion. This undermines the legitimacy of the circuit, and some may consider the initiative as a ‘joke’ – this has been proved as cisgender men have concealed

their identity or faked it and competed under a fake alias, there have also been cases where players within Game Changers have gotten men to play on their accounts during the online season which is considered ‘smurfing’. These issues have made the community question how these events have happened, affecting the legitimacy of the league.

A general issue within esports is that many female players have lacked access to their participation in higher-level gameplay as they are discriminated against. By having no previous support structure or initiatives to help combat this, women are harassed online in different forms, such as verbal abuse and griefing. Moreover, these initiatives that promote visibility by creating separate leagues may inadvertently reinforce segregation rather than helping integration. Cranmer *et al.*, (2021) believes that the end goal of inclusivity should not be separation, but a structural transformation that allows all genders to compete equitably at the high levels.

### **Summary of Key Findings**

In summary, the secondary data supports the following key conclusions:

- Marginalised genders remain severely underrepresented in esports, despite the efforts to improve these numbers.
- Toxicity remains a persistent barrier, particularly in voice-chat communication-based games and high-stakes competitive environments.
- Inclusivity initiatives like Game Changers are important first steps but their impact is limited without community support.
- There is a cyclical loop between exclusion and toxicity that can only be disrupted by publisher intervention.
- The impact of toxicity affects mental health.

### **Implications for Future Research & Practices**

Therefore, these findings underscore the necessity for standardised policies within esports, this could be a set guideline that all publishers, tournament organisers, and esports organisations have to follow in order to combat toxicity and make the esports community a more inclusive industry. Additionally, different entities within esports could create more initiatives to influence the esports community into respecting each other and make it the norm. This has been seen in Riot Games’ Honour system in League of Legends, where players can honour another player based on how they play, providing benefits in-game and it builds a ranking system that puts well-behaved players together (Riot Games, 2025).

As Game Changers was installed in 2021, there is not much research on the tournament circuit. To assess whether this continues to make a positive impact within the Valorant ecosystem, longitudinal studies would become beneficial as the research can help assess the changes to the community. An intersectional approach would recognise and address experiences of participants in Game Changers, as the key issues stem from toxicity based on gender, ethnicity, and other identities within esports and online spaces.

## **Discussion**

The discussion interprets the study's key findings in the light of the literature review, focusing on the correlation between inclusivity, toxicity, and representation in esports and video games. Using an interpretivist approach with critical theory, this will continue to explore the effectiveness of initiatives like Game Changers and how the lack of representation or the sexualisation of female characters shape the experiences of marginalised participants in the gaming and esports ecosystems.

### **Structural Barriers and the Illusion of Inclusion**

The literature outlines the dominance of cisgender male norms within esports culture (Taylor, T. L., 2012; Ruvalcaba *et al.*, 2018), and the findings reaffirm that marginalised players often feel excluded from gaming communities and mainstream esports spaces. Initiatives like Game Changers offer structural support and visibility, yet they have been implemented within an ecosystem that has not fundamentally reviewed their approach or viewpoints to diversity and inclusion.

While Riot Games was one of the first video game publishers to take the first steps to institutionalise inclusivity compared to other publishers, there have been questions on whether these initiatives serve genuine empowerment or whether it is part of their corporate social responsibility to improve brand image. Game Changers has helped provide a safe space for marginalised competitors, but by having a separate division, people still look down on it.

Scholars have criticised such programs as exclusive spaces are considered to perpetuate marginalised identities from 'real' competition. However, players like 'Florescent' have proven that women and marginalised genders have the ability to compete in these spaces outside of Game Changers, becoming a role model for the newer generation of players.

### **Cultural Legitimacy and the Cyclical Toxicity Loop**

Toxicity remains prevalent within the gaming and esports spaces. The literature review highlights how toxicity in gaming is not random, but culturally ingrained. The disinhibition effect (Suler, J., 2004) and social conformity biases continue to fuel the dominance of toxicity in gaming; and findings confirm that women and marginalised players face disproportionately focused hostility online, especially when entering the high-visibility spaces like tournaments or live events. Outside of the esports space, women who livestream on websites like 'Twitch' were over ten times more likely to receive directed sexual comments about their physical appearance and gender compared to male streamers (Ruvalcaba *et al.*, 2018; Merry, O. J., & Whitfield, K. C., 2024).

A key insight from the findings section is the existence of the cyclical loop regarding toxicity and inclusion, as the more diversity initiatives generate greater exposure to marginalised players, it correlates with increased harassment and backlash online. This cycle represents the fragility of acceptance and cultural legitimacy in esports from perspectives who are not within

the marginalised demographic. Rather than being neutral or supportive, competitive spaces remain a contested subject within esports.

Perception from the community and those affiliated in higher ranks in esports, such as influencers, continue to shape how marginalised players are viewed – examples such as Semmler in Counter-Strike have a negative effect on shaping the views on inclusivity programs, and the overall acceptance of those who are under the transgender umbrella. The absence of structural accountability within the last few decades have enabled a persistent culture of gatekeeping esports to cisgender men (Witowski, E., 2018; Paaßen *et al.*, 2016) and misogyny.

### **Sexualisation and Representation in Gaming Culture**

The sexualisation of female characters in video games is a foundational issue that contributes to the exclusion of women in esports. Gray *et al.*, (2018) explored hegemonic conceptions of women and mention that “there is a tendency to depict women in a sexualised manner with either less clothing (Beasley, B., & Standley, T. C., 2002; Taylor, T. L., 2006), absurd or idealised body proportions (Schröder, A., 2008; Martins *et al.*, 2009), and discursive positioning as sexually promiscuous (MacCallum-Steward, E., 2009)”. By using Gray *et al.*, (2018)’s examination of multiple scholars and research, the portrayal of hyper-feminised, objectified female characters in video games establishes a symbolic norm that undermines women in general and as players.

This issue surfaces in the findings, where players are expected to conform to the social expectation to keep their aesthetic standards or to prove themselves against the cultural assumptions of incompetence. The objectification of women in game design sets the stage for their real-life devaluation, reinforcing the reason as to why initiatives like Game Changers exist.

Valorant offers some contrast to other titles by including more diverse and less overtly sexualised female characters, but the legacy of decades of representation bias still influences community attitudes as seen in Figure 6. Valorant Content Creator, Tenshi, made a social media post about the recent female character designs ‘Waylay’ and ‘Vyse’, where she sexualises the characters and says they do not meet the standards compared to older characters. This post faced a lot of backlash from others in the industry and the marginalised communities as they argued that representation is important and not every video game character needs to be hypersexualised.

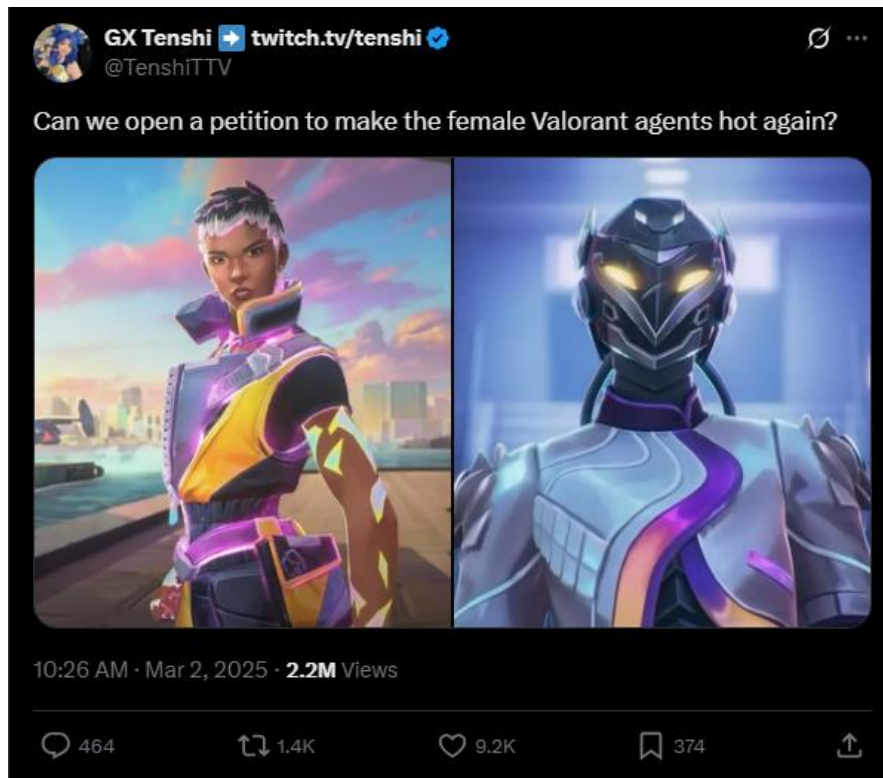


Figure 6 - Content Creator 'Tenshi' X Post about the Sexualisation of Female Characters in Valorant

### **Corporate Inclusion versus Community Empowerment**

Riot Games has a dual influence on the esports ecosystem as they provide necessary funding and exposure for their inclusivity projects. But on the other hand, they risk facing being questioned if the reason for diversifying the ecosystem is for their reputational or commercial benefit. This is because Riot Games faced a \$100 million lawsuit in 2018 regarding their female employees for discrimination, where the California's Department of Fair Employment & Housing wrote that the video game publisher engaged in 'systemic sex discrimination and harassment' (BBC, 2021).

Therefore, people within the community raise questions about the authenticity of corporate engagement, especially since Blizzard Entertainment has been in a similar lawsuit with their female employees facing discrimination and harassment in the workplace. This creates the argument that these efforts to embrace diversity and inclusion risk becoming symbolic, rather than helping the structural integrity within esports.

### **Conceptual Framework for Change**

A conceptual framework can be created using the research in this thesis, this can help the future of sustaining diversity, equity, and inclusion within the esports industry. By implementing structural support from Riot Games using their model, the ecosystem will be able to fund itself based on reinvesting revenue from Riot's annual income and by sponsorships from endemic and non-endemic brands.

If Riot Games can implement more policies within their games, or more initiatives to help shift negative societal and cultural views on gender and sexual toxicity, this could normalise diverse participation within their ecosystem and set an example for other esports titles worldwide. Moreover, Riot can continue to keep their current ideas to not oversexualise their characters as it challenges the harmful stereotypes and societal views on how a woman should be.

If one of these areas lag behind, such as when women are sexualised for their aesthetic appearance, progress is undermined as the tournament series is not protecting competitors and the legitimacy of representation is harmed. By incorporating these frameworks into the industry, it can build on disrupting the negative cyclical loop of toxicity and exclusion.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, this dissertation has examined the intersection of inclusivity and toxicity within the fast-growing esports industry, with a specific focus on Valorant Game Changers and similar initiatives that followed after. The research utilised secondary academic and news sources to explore how gender disparities, online harassment, and cultural stigmatisation affect the participation and recognition of marginalised groups in competitive gaming environments, especially focusing on female and non-binary individuals. Through using an interpretivist viewpoint with critical theory, this thesis has been able to analyse the systemic barriers that are embedded in esports culture and evaluated the initiatives that have been implemented to try and counter these issues.

The literature review established that the culture of gaming and esports has historically reflected broader social inequalities and stigmas, particularly through the normalisation of misogyny, racism, hyper-sexualisation of women, and underrepresentation of diversity and ethnic minorities. These issues are further compounded by the structural design and hierarchical systems of gaming communities over the years before esports became the phenomenon it is today, and the disinhibition effect and the continuous toxic behaviours that come from this effect are usually rewarded or praised by others who conform to these beliefs.

The findings section has revealed recurring themes across various infographics, data sources, and academic studies – these include the prevalence of toxicity, the critical role of visibility in transforming online communities for the better, and the limits of diversity initiatives. Programmes such as Game Changers and ESL Impact represent positive steps towards addressing gender imbalances within esports and offer safer and supportive competitive spaces. However, these efforts often coexist with the persistent issues of online harassment and exclusion, especially outside of the designated competitive circuits. Despite this, evidence has demonstrated that representation has improved in these isolated contexts, and participants are able to move onto the main leagues.

The discussion was able to link these insights back to the key theoretical frameworks, highlighting that initiatives like Game Changers provide a platform for marginalised gamers, but they cannot alone address the systemic issues within esports and gaming culture. The

sexualisation of female characters underscores the prevalence of the male-gaze and dominance within gaming spaces.

In conclusion, the esports industry has been taking steps in order to change the systemic barriers that prevent evolution within the scenes. By promoting the regulation of community conduct, enabling marginalised competitors a scene to compete, and adding both inclusive and less overtly sexualised characters to video games, the efforts will eventually make competitive gaming a truly inclusive space for everyone.

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# Appendices

## RESEARCH ETHICS

### Disclaimer Form



The following declaration should be made in cases where the researcher and the supervisor (where applicable) conclude that it is not necessary to apply for ethical approval for a specific research project.

#### PART A: TO BE COMPLETED BY RESEARCHER

Name of Researcher:	Jennifer Hart
School	School of Digital Technologies & Arts

Student/Course Details (If Applicable)			
Student ID Number:	22103468		
Name of Supervisor(s)/Module Tutor:	Joshua Jarrett		
PhD/MPhil project:	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Taught Postgraduate Project/Assignment:	<input type="checkbox"/>	Award Title:	Esports
Undergraduate Project/Assignment:	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Module Title:	Final Year Project

Project Title:	Exploring Inclusivity and Gender-Based Toxicity within Esports: A Study into Valorant and Game Changers		
Project Outline:	<p>To assess issues within the popular esports title, Valorant.</p> <p>The goal of this project is to explore the relationship between Game Changers competitors, the esports community, and Riot Games. This includes researching previous literature regarding similar projects. The main question to be answered is 'How well does Riot Games regulate the tournament series and protect competitors?'.</p> <p>Previous case studies have shown that female oriented teams within esports are subjected to humility and toxicity, a famous example is the implementation of Team Vaevictis within a national league. We want to be able to compare how the esports community has evolved and if toxicity still exists towards women in the esports community.</p>		
Give a brief description of research procedure (methods, tests etc.)	This will require researching and using secondary data from academic papers and case studies that relate to the esports industry and other similar industries such as game studies and gender studies.		
Expected Start Date:	01/04/2025	Expected End Date:	02/05/2025

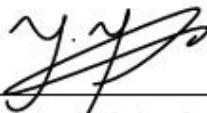
#### Declaration

I/We confirm that the University's Ethical Review Policy has been consulted and that all ethical issues and implications in relation to the above project have been considered. I/We confirm that ethical approval need not be sought. I/We confirm that:

The research does not involve human or animal participants	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
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University Research Ethics Committee – February 2018

The research does not present an indirect risk to non-participants (human or animal).	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
The research does not raise ethical issues due to the potential social or environmental implications of the study.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
The research does not re-use previously collected personal data which is sensitive in nature, or enables the identification of individuals.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Has a risk assessment been completed for this project?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> N/A

Signature of Researcher:	Jennifer Hart	Date:	27/03/2025
Signature(s) of Project Supervisor(s) (If student) OR Signature of Head of Department/ Senior researcher (if staff)		Date:	29th April 2025

**NB:** If the research departs from the protocol which provides the basis for this disclaimer then ethical review may be required and the applicant and supervisor (where applicable) should consider whether or not the disclaimer declaration remains appropriate. If it is no longer appropriate an application for ethical review **MUST** be submitted.

Figures 1 & 2 – Wu, J.-H., Wang, S.-C. and Tsai, H.-H. (2010) ‘Falling in Love with Online Games: The Uses and Gratifications Perspective’, *Computers in Human Behavior*, 26(6), pp. 1862–1871. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2010.07.033.

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