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“I Guess You Don’t View Me as Equal Then, Do You?” Understanding the Role of Gender on the Experiences of Esports Players

Jessica Hayburn

Objectives: The esports industry has rapidly grown in the last decade with greater career opportunities within it. Despite this, key issues including gender disparity, toxic communities, and pressures to perform have yet to be properly addressed. The research question was, “To what extent does gender play a role in the experiences and expectations of esports players?”

Design: A qualitative approach was used to understand the complex nature of psychosocial and societal issues participants experienced. The study was underpinned by Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987) to understand how societal gender roles may explain the gender divide in esports.

Methods: Following university ethical approval, nine esports players (5 males, 4 females, and one female/non-binary) from a range of games and ranks participated in a semi-structured interview to discuss their experiences in esports including pressures and perceptions of gender differences. Interviews lasted between 29-90 minutes (M= 49 minutes), then were transcribed, and analysed following the six-step thematic analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Results: Twenty sub-themes and four key themes emerged from the interviews: (1) Toxicity in Gaming and Esports, (2) Gaming Reflects Societal Norms, (3) A Developing Esports Industry, and (4) Issues and Goals of Esports Players.

Conclusions: The research question was supported by showing distinct gender differences experienced by esports players including online hostilities and misogyny, and how societal norms may have exacerbated these issues. Reform is required within esports for greater representation and inclusion. Future research should consider the experiences of other marginalised groups and psychological pressures on players.