Communicating and Practicing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Finnish Esports Organizations: Challenges and Opportunities

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In this study, we explore how Finnish esports organizations are communicating and aiming to increase diversity, equity, and inclusion in their activities. The study is based on a qualitative analysis on two sets of research material: public websites of 53 esports organizations and interviews with representatives of five esports organizations. We have analyzed the textual and visual contents on these websites to see how Finnish esports organizations communicate diversity, equity, and inclusion—or exclusion—to their audiences. Analyzing the interview material, we have examined how Finnish esports organizations understand equity, what kind of diversity, equity, and inclusion practices they have applied in their operations, and what kind of challenges they have experienced in this area. Overall, this study describes how Finnish esports organizations do and do not present and experience themselves as diverse, equal, and inclusive environments, and what measures could be taken to increase these aspects in the Finnish esports scene in the future. The results of the study can be applied to various gaming and esports organizations and cultural contexts globally.

Keywords: electronic sports, DEI, communication, practices, stakeholders

In the past decade, esports—generally defined as organized, competitive, digital gaming (e.g., Turtiainen et al., 2020)—has become a central emerging form of game-based business and entertainment. Its growth is showing no signs of stopping, and esports is expected to reach a global value of 5.48 billion U.S. dollars in 2029 (Gough, 2022b) and an audience of over 640 million viewers in 2025 (Gough, 2022a). While the size and significance of esports is growing—not only in terms of economic, but also cultural and societal impact—it is becoming increasingly important to examine the phenomenon from the perspective of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

Currently, the demographic primarily involved in esports—both as participants in various roles and the audience—is known to be very limited, consisting mostly of young, predominantly White and Asian men from middle- or upper-class backgrounds (e.g., Fletcher, 2020). For marginalized player groups shut outside the hegemonic image of an esports player, there exist many structural and cultural barriers for participation in esports due to various forms of discrimination, harassment, and toxicity (e.g., Choi et al., 2020; Darvin et al., 2021; Fletcher, 2020; Ruotsalainen & Friman, 2018; Ruvalcaba et al., 2018; Ståhl & Rusk, 2020; Witkowski, 2018). This leads to social, cultural, and economic inequity between the dominant and marginalized player groups (e.g., Darvin et al., 2021; Witkowski, 2018). As such, there is an urgent need to critically explore these harmful structures as well as the practices enforcing them and to find solutions aiming to increase the inclusion and accessibility of esports for diverse player groups, on all levels of the esports ecosystem from small gaming communities to the biggest leagues and events.

Alongside game developers and big companies running leagues and tournaments, grassroots organizations, such as player organizations, educational organizations, and tournament events run largely by volunteer labor, play an important part in building the structures and culture of esports through the principles and practices applied in their everyday operations (Pauketat, 2022; Taylor & Stout, 2020; Witkowski, 2023). As such, they also have power to initiate change and create more sustainable esports culture. In this study, we investigate ways of improving cultural sustainability in esports (Friman et al., 2023) by examining how different aspects of DEI are present at such grassroots esports organizations in one national and cultural context: Finnish esports.

Finland provides an interesting national context for studying esports as it has a long tradition of internationally known gaming events (such as Assembly Computer Festival), a vibrant national esports scene, and the country has also been leading the way in the institutionalization of esports, as the Finnish Olympic Committee was the second in the world (after South Korea) to accept the national esports federation (The Finnish Esports Federation SEUL ry) as an associate member in November 2016 and full member in 2019. Finland is also home to several world-leading esports athletes, such as Joona "Serral" Sotala (*StarCraft II* world champion 2018 and 2022); Jesse "JerAx" Vainikka and Topias "Topson" Taavitsainen (winners of the *Dota 2* world championship tournament, The International in 2018 and 2019); and Lasse "Matumbaman" Urpalainen (winner of The International 2017). As a society, Finland is known for its strong democracy and is also ranked relatively high in the areas of social justice and gender equality (Economist Intelligence, 2021; Hellmann et al., 2019; World Economic Forum, 2021). Thus, it will be interesting to examine if Finnish esports organizations are particularly advanced in their DEI practices.

We will explore this topic from two connected perspectives. First, we will analyze how the organizations present these features in their public communications through their websites. Second, through interviews conducted with representatives from selected organizations, we will analyze what equity means for them and what kind of equity measures they have or are planning to implement in their activities. Through the selected approach, we will

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examine if and how Finnish esports organizations present themselves as inclusive and accessible environments for marginalized players, both from the perspective of their public image as well as their actions and intentions. Importantly, we will also examine what kind of challenges the organizations experience in implementing DEI measures. More broadly, our aim is to demonstrate how different types of organizations acting in various areas of the esports ecosystem can affect the accessibility of esports for diverse participant groups and how gaming organizations' communications and other practices may work as a tool for increased inclusion —or lead to the opposite outcome, if not planned carefully.

Literature Review

Discrimination and Marginalization in Esports

Earlier research has shown that digital gaming environments in general are discriminatory, even hostile, toward marginalized player groups such as women players, LGBTQIA+ players, and players of color (e.g., Fox & Tang, 2017; Nakamura, 2019; Passmore & Mandryk, 2020; Richard & Gray, 2018; Uttarapong et al., 2021). In a survey study with 293 participants, Fox and Tang (2017) found that women players experience gender-based general and sexual harassment in games, leading them to develop coping strategies, or even to withdraw from gaming altogether. In an interview study with women and LGBTQ streamers, Uttarapong et al. (2021) have described how streamers representing identities that are marginalized in game culture experience heavy amounts of hate speech connected to racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia. Drawing on their extensive work in this area, Richard and Gray (2018) have also shown how players of color are racially profiled and experience racial harassment in online gaming environments. These are only a few examples of the many studies highlighting the discrimination and marginalization pervading digital game culture.

Players marginalized in digital game culture also face many challenges when entering competitive gaming and esports environments, including discrimination and harassment based on the player's identity, such as misogyny, racism, and homophobia. In their reading on the case of baseless cheating accusations against Korean professional esports player Kim "Geguri" Se-yeon, who was the first woman player in the Overwatch League, the highest level of competition for *Overwatch*, Choi et al. (2020) have demonstrated how there exist gendered surveillance mechanisms used to police the behavior and appearance of women players and to target them with gender-based harassment in competitive gaming and esports communities. Analyzing the community and media reception of an imaginary woman Overwatch Contenders player "Ellie," Friman and Ruotsalainen (2022) have highlighted similar mechanics limiting women's participation in esports by defining them primarily through their gender identity and related misogynistic assumptions instead of their player performance. In a similar manner, Fletcher (2020) has described the neoliberal structures of esports that exclude Black players in particular ways, for example, through racialized ideas of skill and meritocracy. Furthermore, examining questions of nationality, ethnicity, and race in connection to masculinity in *League of Legends* esports, Zhu (2018) has demonstrated how Asian bodies are othered, dehumanized, even erased in the "international" (i.e., Western) esports environment that "is dependent on a perception of racial and ethnic homogeneity" (p. 236). Moreover, in their analysis focusing on player identity construction in team-based first-person shooter game *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*, Ståhl and Rusk (2020) have described

how derogatory terms referring to homosexuality and femininity are used in player communication to signal incompetence. These and many other studies (e.g., Gray, 2020; Groen, 2013; Ruotsalainen & Friman, 2018; Ruvalcaba et al., 2018; Siutila & Havaste, 2019; Witkowski, 2018) highlight the systematic nature of discrimination and harassment targeted at women, persons of color, and participants representing gender and sexual minorities in esports, and demonstrate the cultural structures and practices leading to exclusion of these marginalized player groups. Despite this, there is a culture of toxic meritocracy (Paul, 2018) in esports, an underlying false belief that everyone, despite their background, has an equal chance to succeed solely based on their skill and dedication (Fletcher, 2020; Friman & Ruotsalainen, 2022; Ruotsalainen & Friman, 2018; Siutila & Havaste, 2019; Taylor & Stout, 2020).

Esports Organizations and the Finnish Context

It is worth noting here that these structural and cultural issues of marginalization and discrimination are very similar in esports and traditional sports (for an overview on the latter, see Staurowsky & Hart, 2023). However, organizational structures of esports differ in many ways from those of traditional sports, which means these issues appear and are tackled in different environments. While organizations in traditional sports are usually organized under strongly institutionalized and regulated national and international sports federations, esports are still, for the most part, lacking in such organizations and fragmented on many levels (Peng et al., 2020; Witkowski, 2023). Furthermore, while traditional sports are heavily commercialized as well, esports organizations are fully dependent on the companies that create—and maintain full power over—the games played in the competitions—to the extent that this has been suggested to be a defining feature of esports as a cultural phenomenon (Karhulahti, 2017). Indeed, many esports organizations are left to navigate a complex and occasionally conflicted position as a local representative without official governmental support, drifting between ideological aims to perform nonprofit service for legitimizing esports as a sport and highly profitable commercial opportunities of esports business (Witkowski, 2023).

In addition, the scale and type of actors in this field range from giant international corporations producing esports games and organizing leagues and tournaments for them (e.g., Activision Blizzard) and international esports production companies (e.g., ESL), to small individual tournament organizers and player associations. Some esports organizations are fully commercial, some supported by national governments (e.g., national esports federations, government-supported educational institutions with esports programs), and some fully independent, run by volunteer labor. In their study on stakeholder dynamics in esports governance, Peng et al. (2020) identified 10 different stakeholder groups in the esports ecosystem: game publishers, players, teams, tournament and league organizers, broadcast and media, sponsors, and fans (communities) as the key esports stakeholders, and esports associations and federations, government agencies, and self-proclaimed industrial guardian organizations as the emerging esports stakeholders. Despite this variety of actors within the esports ecosystem, much of the existing research on these organizations is focused on national esports representatives (e.g., Witkowski, 2023) or esports programs in educational institutions (e.g., Hoffman et al., 2022; Martin & Song, 2021; Taylor & Stout, 2020).

Finnish Esports Federation, founded in 2008, is the umbrella organization for Finnish esports and the Finnish representative in the International Esports Federation. On a national level, Finnish esports has received strong institutionalized support, as the national esports federation is funded by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, and the federation received full membership of the Finnish Olympic Committee in 2019. This also means that Finnish esports athletes have the option to perform their mandatory military service at the Finnish Defense Forces Sports School alongside other athletes. Unlike the United States, for example, Finland does not have a culture of university sports, esports included. There are, however, a few esports programs in vocational schools and higher education.

On their website, the Finnish Esports Federation lists, at the time of writing this article, 59 member organizations, categorized as "event organizations," "associations," "educational institutions," and "game and player organizations." In this study, we are following a similar categorization for the organizations we are studying, as we see this accurately reflecting the Finnish esports scene. However, differing from the Finnish Esports Federation, we have combined the categories of "associations" and "game and player organizations" into one. As such, here we will be examining three different types of esports organizations: educational, event, and player organizations—particularly from the perspective of their DEI practices.

DEI in Esports Organizations

DEI form a central concept group for initiatives aiming to create better environments for various participants in different areas of life, such as education (Weuffen et al., 2023), work environments (Hays-Thomas, 2022), and sports (Staurowsky & Hart, 2023). In the context of esports, Painter and Sahm (2023) have written about "esports' JEDI issues," adding (social) justice in the mix. In their study on Asian, European, and North American media coverage of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion issues in esports, Painter and Sahm (2023) found that English language media coverage on esports does not often cover JEDI topics (they appeared in less than 20% of media stories), and the existing stories covering JEDI issues focus on gender and age, while mostly ignoring issues related to, for example, race and social class. However, there also exist initiatives focused on promoting DEI in esports, such as the nonprofit organization AnyKey in the United States (AnyKey, n.d.), and esports leagues and tournaments focusing on creating safer environments for participation for marginalized players (usually women), such as ESL's Impact League (ESL, n.d.) and Riot Games' Valorant Game Changers (Riot Games, n.d.). Some esports associations, leagues, events, and other organizations have also included DEI perspectives in their guidelines and practices (e.g., Amazan-Hall et al., 2018).

DEI practices in esports organizations have been previously studied, especially in the context of North American collegiate esports (e.g., Kauweloa, 2021; Pauketat, 2022; Taylor & Stout, 2020), although there are studies focused on other local contexts (e.g., Pigott et al., 2023). Based on their overview of current and emerging trends in the research on social issues in esports, Tjønndal et al. (2023) noted that most existing contributions in this area are theoretical and conceptual in nature. However, next we will describe existing previous studies exploring DEI issues in esports organizations based on empirical material or focused on empirical implications.

In their interview study with leaders of collegiate esports organizations (clubs and varsity programs) in the United States and Canada, Taylor and Stout (2020) aimed to document efforts to improve conditions of esports participation, particularly for women, but found these to be rare. However, they found that especially clubs led by women were taking steps toward increased gender diversity through inclusion policies, such as Codes of Conduct, and through outreach efforts targeted toward other student groups and marginalized populations (Taylor & Stout, 2020). They also noted some efforts being made to increase the racial and ethnic diversity in these esports clubs and varsity programs (Taylor & Stout, 2020). All in all, Taylor and Stout (2020) concluded that practical efforts to increase diversity in these North American collegiate esports organizations were rare and mostly shouldered by marginalized individuals, and that, diversity, in and of itself, was understood in one-dimensional terms. In another national and cultural context, based on interviews with leaders in Norwegian esports organizations, Pigott et al. (2023) have explored how organizational structures, processes, and practices contribute to the production of gender inequity in esports leadership. In their analysis, the authors recognized gender inequality issues in underrepresentation across all roles and levels, division of roles and labor, recruitment and networking opportunities, and lack of awareness and acknowledgement of these issues (Pigott et al., 2023).

Pauketat (2022) has presented an overview of various "toxic" aspects of esports culture, particularly in terms of gender and race, how they appear in collegiate esports environments, and what kind of strategies can be applied in creating more inclusive environments for collegiate esports in the United States. Pauketat's (2022) suggestions for these inclusion strategy tools include creating policies and standards such as Codes of Conduct to hold participants accountable for their behavior; training and supporting players to recognize and call out inappropriate behavior online; expanding their recruitment strategies beyond players who are already playing at professional level; and widening the range of games and platforms used within the organization.

Examining esports from the perspective of Sport for Development movement through interactive focus groups and interviews with various esports stakeholders (national esports federations, trade unions, game publishers, teams and gamers, tournament organizers, and media entities) in the United Kingdom and the United States, Hayday and Collison (2020) have studied how esports may enact social inclusion and create positive experiences for women and girls. Based on their empirical analysis, Hayday and Collison (2020) describe the state of social inclusion within esports as contested, because while esports has the potential to offer a safe an inclusive environment for participation, there are significant tensions between this opportunity and the reality related to problematic behaviors and practices as well as the complicated relationship between esports communities and the industry.

This study will broaden the scope of existing research in this area in two main ways. First, we will focus on the practical measures esports organizations can take to increase DEI in esports through their own operations and activities, to increase the limited number of valuable research conducted from this perspective. Second, we are expanding the geographical and cultural range of research in this area by focusing on the national context of Finland, which is a European and Nordic country. Until now, there has not been, to our best knowledge, any research published on the Finnish esports scene on a national level. In this study, we will examine Finnish esports organizations' website communications

from the perspective of including and excluding different participant groups, especially those that are known to be marginalized in esports environments, and how these esports organizations themselves describe their understanding of equity, the DEI measures they have applied within their activities, and the challenges they have experienced in this area.

Methods

We will present a qualitative analysis on two sets of research material, both collected and analyzed by the three authors together. The first material set, collected in October and November 2021, consists of the public websites of 53 Finnish esports organizations, including associations (14); communities, teams, and player organizations (16); competition leagues (three); educational institutions (eight); esports events (five); gaming spaces (two); and other organizations (five), such as coaching services and platforms. The websites were available in Finnish or Swedish (the two official languages in Finland), English, or included content in multiple languages. In the case of multilanguage websites, we analyzed the contents on the default language site.

To collect this material, we first created a list of all the member organizations of the Finnish Esports Federation (SEUL) that were publicly listed on the organization's website at the time, and then added all the esports organizations we personally knew to exist in Finland that were not yet included. Finally, we publicly shared the list we had gathered with our professional communities and in the Finnish esports network, requesting them to include any organizations we might have initially missed. It is worth noting that while we have aimed to make this process as thorough as possible, the list of organizations included in the study is not necessarily comprehensive. However, we believe that the organizations included in the data form a representative sample of Finnish esports organizations.

We used two analysis methods to analyze the website material: qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012) and visual analysis (Barthes, 1982). In the content analysis, we analyzed textual materials on the websites to find statements, goal descriptions, and actions related to DEI—or exclusion. In the visual analysis, we analyzed the visual representations of esports players and other esports participants on the websites, focusing on diversity of representation. We conducted the analysis in two rounds: first making notes of our initial impressions of the contents, based on which we defined the focus areas of our analysis for the second analysis round. As such, our coding was inductive and iterative (Schreier, 2012). To further enhance the reflexivity and overall trustworthiness of the analysis, we divided all material in sections, and each section was coded by two different authors, for both content analysis and visual analysis (Elo et al., 2014; Schreier, 2012).

Analyzing the visual material, we employed Barthes' (1982) levels of visual communication: linguistic message in connection to an image as well as the coded and noncoded iconic substance of the image. Take, for example, a photo of an apple: on a noncoded iconic level, the apple is a fruit; whereas on the coded iconic level, it might be interpreted as anything from a brand to a biblical reference. However, the component on the noncoded level impacts the coded level, such as the color of the apple will influence how it is interpreted. Here, the noncoded level of the visual material (people present and their characteristics) informs the coded level (what does their presence suggest in terms of representation as well as inclusion and exclusion).

The second material set consists of five semistructured theme interviews (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2008) with selected Finnish esports organizations' representatives (six interviewees from five organizations). The interviews were conducted in Zoom in May and June 2022 by the authors. The organizations selected for the interviews include three educational organizations, one event organization, and one player organization. We reached out to several other event organizations and player organizations, but they did not respond to our interview invites. The organizations used either Finnish or Swedish as their primary language of operations and were interviewed in this language.

In the same way as textual website contents, the interview material was transcribed and analyzed utilizing qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012). In our analysis of the interviews, we focused on the organizations' descriptions of their implemented and planned measures for increasing DEI in their activities, and on the opportunities and challenges they have experienced in this area. Following the principles of semistructured theme interviews (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2008), the interview questions were designed to follow five themes: (a) organization's background (e.g., how long has the organization operated, what kind of activities do they produce); (b) meaning of equity (e.g., what is the organization's relationship to and understanding of equity); (c) DEI guidelines and practices (e.g., what kinds of people participate in the organization's activities, do they currently reflect their target audience, in what aspects are the participants diverse or homogenous); (d) DEI challenges (e.g., what kind of challenges does the organization see in starting to plan or in implementing DEI measures in the organization's activities); and (e) DEI resources (e.g., what kind of DEI resources the organization is utilizing or would find useful).

According to Elo et al. (2014), in qualitative content analysis studies, trustworthiness of the study can and should be critically examined at every part of the research process, from preparing the materials to reporting the results. To ensure the trustworthiness of this study, we have chosen relevant research material collection methods and interview informants considering the study's objective, followed relevant method guides in both material collection and analysis, and utilized practices such as researcher triangulation and iterative coding during the analysis process. We have aimed to report our analysis results carefully, demonstrating the connections between the research material and analysis results (Elo et al., 2014). In the following section, we will present our findings from our analysis of these materials, with selected quotes from the textual website contents and interviews, as well as example images of the website visuals to demonstrate them.

Findings

Communicating Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Exclusion: Website Analysis

DEI Contents

Through the analysis, we discovered that 26 of the 53 analyzed websites included some type of DEI contents. Our criteria for these contents were any type of document or text within the webpage that indicated, suggested, stated, or demanded diversity, equity, or inclusion within the organization and its activities. In practice, this could mean specific DEI documents (e.g., equity and equality plan), but also, for instance, rules, descriptions, and similar contents. We defined five different, albeit occasionally overlapping, categories for DEI contents found on the websites. These are

(a) DEI documents, (b) statements and practices, (c) values and goals, (d) rules and guidelines (e.g., Codes of Conduct), and (e) activity descriptions (see Table 1).

Most of the DEI contents on the websites were short, consisting of one or two sentences. There was one notable exception to this. On the website of the Finnish Esports Federation, there were two specific DEI documents: an equity and equality plan and a guide for organizing accessible esports events. It is also worth mentioning the website of Special eSports—Esteettömän eUrheilun Tuki ry, an organization focusing on esports accessible to players with disabilities. Their website, while fully focusing accessibility in esports, was, however, overall rather minimalistic and did not describe in detail what kind of steps the organization took to accommodate different player groups in their esports activities.

Other DEI documents on the organizations' websites included disciplinary plans, guides for game educators, and a brochure with an inclusion statement. We also placed specific documents titled "Non-toxic Certificates" into this category. Two of the organizations had received these from participating in a training organized by a nationwide project "Non-toxic—non-discriminatory gaming culture," coordinated by the City of Helsinki's Youth Services and funded by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture 2017–2023. According to their website, the project is focused on developing gaming into a hobby which is "open and safe for all, free from hate speech and harassment" (Nuorten Helsinki, 2022).

The second DEI content category consisted of DEI statements and practices. On the websites, these would usually refer to the ways in which the organizations directly aimed to increase inclusion within the organization. In practice, these contents were, for example, statements about welcoming all kinds of players to participate in the organization's activities (which often meant playing), or statements about how playing video games or participating in esports belongs to everyone: "Every player is welcome—regardless of age or clan." Contents in this category also included, for example, descriptions of activities being free to participate, or having "zero tolerance for trolling and bullying."

Closely connected to the previous category, the third category of DEI contents included descriptions of the organization's values and goals related to DEI. These were usually presented by explicit value statements ("the organisation's values are equity and equality") or by describing the ways in which the organization aims to be an inclusive environment ("the organization aims to be a safe space" and "the organization is LGBTQ+ friendly environment").

The fourth category of DEI contents included rules and guidelines, such as Codes of Conduct. These were often presented as lists on the website, with a written expectation that people participating in any of the organization's activities would follow them. These rules and guidelines usually focused on player behavior and explicitly prohibited any kind of toxic, rude, or abusive behavior, including sexual harassment and bullying. They were often presented in a very concise form, such as: "No flaming or abusing other members. Treat each other in a respectful manner."

The final DEI content category we identified was activity descriptions. These were descriptions of esports as an activity that contained some type of a statement about diversity, equity, or inclusion within its field, such as "accessible esports promotes healthy lifestyle and is inclusive." In these descriptions, esports, in and of itself, was defined as an activity that supports DEI—and the organization was presented as such by extension.

A central theme across these Finnish esports organizations' website DEI contents was participant behavior. This was communicated through expectations and rules. Participants were expected to follow the somewhat blurry ideals of "sportsmanship" and "fair play," and occasionally explicit guidelines such as the organization's Code of Conduct. On the websites, contents regarding DEI were also generally focused on including players of all ages and with various skill levels or, notably less often, focused on women players and players representing gender and sexual minorities. Furthermore, race or ethnicity, class, or socioeconomic status was not mentioned at all. Disabilities were only mentioned once, on the website of the organization focused on esports players with disabilities.

Explicit Exclusion

In addition to identifying website contents that communicate DEI, we also aimed to identify contents that communicate exclusion of any kind. While exclusion contents can be harder to identify and define than DEI contents, we regarded their potential existence as an important factor to examine alongside and in contrast to DEI contents. For the purpose of this analysis, we defined exclusion content as a type of content that either clearly states that some groups are not welcome or excludes certain groups by only including others.

The only website contents that could be interpreted as excluding certain participants were related to two factors: (a) skill level and (b) nationality and language. The first occasionally appeared on the websites of esports team organizations. We would like to note here that reading this requirement as exclusion content is not a moral statement. Expecting a certain skill level from participants is an understandable requirement, as these teams would need all their players to be able to play at a certain level matching the rest of the team in order to be competitive in their chosen esports game.

The second type of exclusion contents found on the websites was nationality and language. In practice, this meant that the organizations would explicitly name Finnish players as their target group ("we invite all Finnish players to play with us"). This was often intersecting, either explicitly or implicitly, with the language or languages used on the website. Finland has two official languages, Finnish and Swedish, with a majority of the population

Table 1 Types of DEI Contents on Finnish Esports Organizations' Websites

DEI content type	Example	Number found
DEI documents	Equity and equality plan	9
Statements and practices	"Every player is welcome, regardless of age and clan"	9
Values and goals	"Values: unity; advancing equality in esports"	10
Rules and guidelines	Rules against discrimination and hate speech	8
Activity descriptions	"Accessible esports promotes healthy lifestyle and is inclusive"	2

Note. DEI = diversity, equity, and inclusion.

speaking Finnish and approximately 5% speaking Swedish as their first language. Most of the organizations' websites were in Finnish, some of those also having at least some content in English. Analyzing these nationality and language related exclusion contents, we did not interpret them as arbitrarily exclusive, either, as their intention seemed to be to communicate about the organization's local scope (based in Finland) and operational language or languages. It is worth noting that while Finland also has several official minority languages (three Sámi languages, Romani, Finnish Sign Language, and Karelian), we did not find any esports organizations that would operate in these languages.

Visual Analysis

In addition to the content analysis on the textual website contents, we also conducted a visual analysis on participant representations within the visual material of the websites, following Barthes' (1982) levels of visual communication, analyzing both coded and noncoded iconic substance of the materials. All the websites had some visual material, although the formats used and their extent varied. Visual material is often included in esports research (e.g., Turtiainen et al., 2020). However, the specific affordances of visual communication and the corresponding analysis is seldom focused upon or made explicit. While there is some research where esports organizations' web pages are used as a part of the research material (e.g., analysis of the Swedish *Counter-Strike* community site Fragbite by

Rambusch, 2010), we were not able to find other studies focused on analyzing visual communications on these websites specifically. Furthermore, most existing studies on esports organizations have explored organizational structures or representative's insights on various issues (e.g., Pigott et al., 2023; Taylor & Stout, 2020; Witkowski, 2023). Here, our aim is to provide an overview of what the visual material on Finnish esports organizations' websites communicates in terms of DEI.

In our analysis, we focused on the visual material that included representations of people; in photos, illustrations, and video. In general, the visual material consisted of individual portraits of key people within the organization (both as photos and illustrations) as well as event photos, promotional videos, illustrations, logotypes, and in-game content. On a noncoded iconic level (Barthes, 1982), the websites' visual assets often signaled a connection to technology through actual technology present (screens, keyboards, controllers, headsets, etc.). Similarly, neon light effects were often employed for the same purpose. For example, in a screen capture from one of the websites, presented in Figure 1, five out of six images contain neon light effects. Furthermore, there were often visual references to traditional sports. Together, these elements created a distinctive sense of an "esports aesthetic" present throughout the material.

On a coded iconic level (Barthes, 1982), these combinations suggest that the visual material communicates a union of technology and athleticism. Through appealing to conventions from traditional sports, such as physical fitness, the visual material
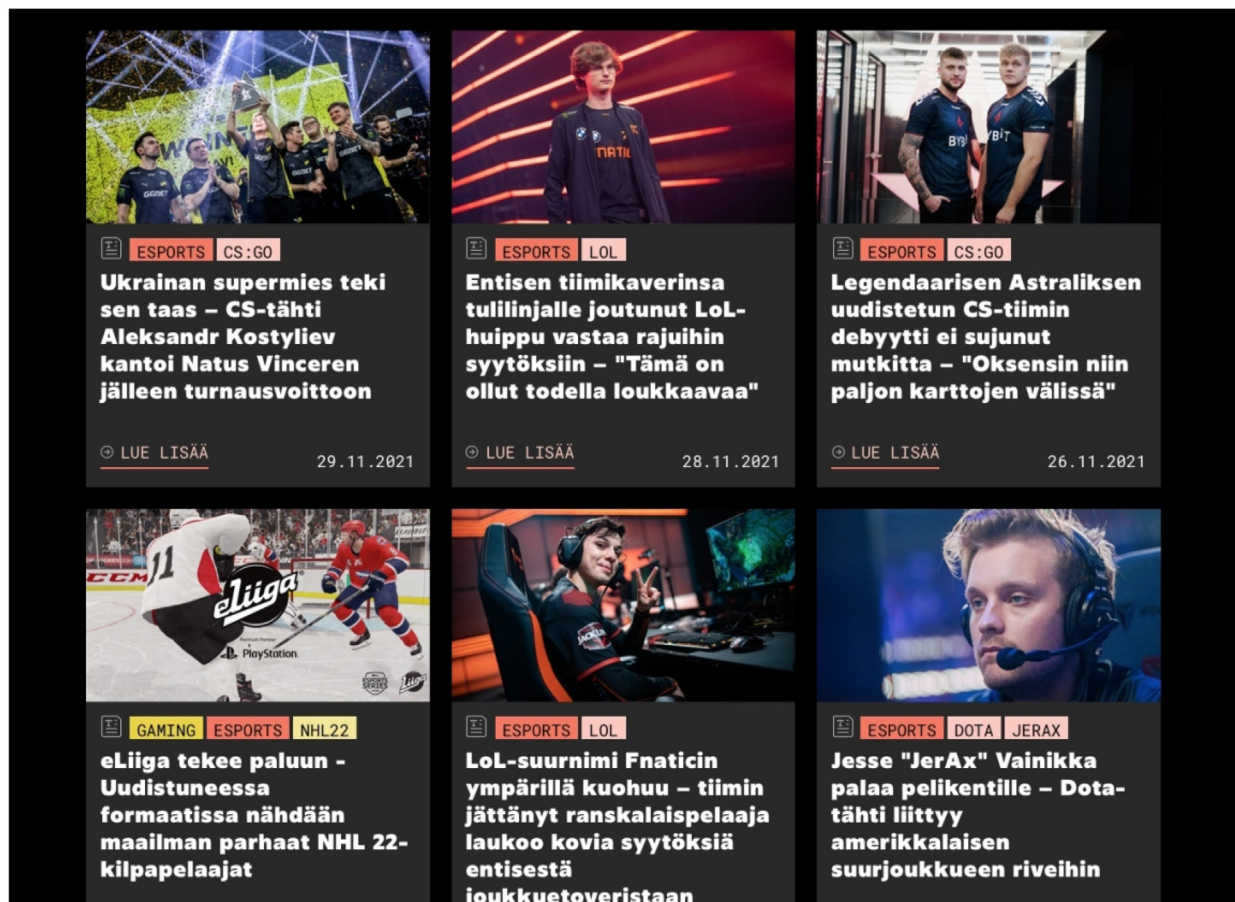

Figure 1 — An example of the "esports aesthetic" commonly present on the websites.

chosen here positions gaming as more than a leisure activity and can be seen as an attempt to legitimize esports as "real" sports (see Turtiainen et al., 2020). However, this might also result in those who are othered by visual representations of traditional sports being othered by this visual material as well, whether or not physical fitness is relevant in an esports setting. A clear majority of the visual material on these websites included people presenting as able-bodied, and the sole clear visual representation of disability was on the website of an organization specifically targeting players with disabilities, Special eSports.

A majority of those visually represented in the material were White, young, able-bodied (assumed) men. The greatest diversity in the material appeared in terms of age, as coaches and other nonplayer stakeholders tend to be, sometimes significantly, older than the players. In terms of gender, there was not much diversity among the websites' visual materials. While there were some (assumed) women present in the images, they were often presented as spectators (for men's play) and seldom seen actively playing. For example, in Figure 2, in the front of the image are two (assumed) men, holding the controllers, whereas there are several (assumed) women present not actively playing but rather socializing and/or spectating. On a coded iconic level, the visual material of these websites suggests that in order to be part of the Finnish esports scene as an active participant, one should be a White, young, able-bodied (assumed) man.

Furthermore, as can be seen in these two examples (Figures 1 and 2), those represented in the visual material were dominantly White, and people of color were seldomly present. In addition to being rare, representation of participants who did not appear as White was also sometimes problematic in terms of contextualization that set them apart from others. For example, in a set of photos introducing members of an esports team, where all but one team member appeared White, this one team member was presented differently from their teammates in written descriptions accompanying the team photos. Unlike the four White teammates who were described through their dedication, career, or skill set, this member was described through their Middle Eastern descent. In cases described above, regarding representations of women and people of color on the websites, the choices made in their representation emphasized their position as "others" in the field of esports instead of communicating inclusion.

Practicing DEI: Interview Analysis

Understanding Equity

Based on our analysis of the visual materials on their websites, Finnish esports organizations seem to be, for the most part, oriented toward White, young, able-bodied men. At the same time, while analyzing the textual contents on their websites, we found various types of DEI contents, communicating intentions, and practices aiming to foster DEI within the organizations. In order to gain a more nuanced perspective of how they consider DEI as a part of their values and activities, we also analyzed the five interviews conducted with representatives from selected Finnish esports organizations.

The first question we asked from all the organization representatives in the interviews was about how they understood the idea of equity: if it had been a topic of discussion and what it meant in their organization. Despite there having been at least some discussions and sometimes practices focused on equity in these organizations, none of the interviewed representatives had a clear understanding about how the concept was understood in their organization specifically. In fact, one interviewee responded that they were personally "careful about describing the organization's official perspective" of equity (I1). On the other hand, one interviewee described that even though they "have very little about its definition on paper," the organization does have documents and practices aimed at increasing equity within their activities (I4). In the case of the educational organizations, they are required by Finnish law to have an equality plan (Act on Equality between Women and Men 609/1986, 5 a §), often also including the aspect of equity. This seemed to guide the way equity was understood in these organizations:

> I3: It [equity] means what it means in terms of the law, so for us it is the same than it is for everyone else, that one has to treat others equally and cannot discriminate based on any … be it religion, and whatever it says in there, skin color, right, ethnicity, sexuality, everything that is listed in there.

In the interviews, the idea of equity was often attached to the idea of not discriminating—in other words, it was not necessarily about active promotion of equity, but rather focused on preventing active discrimination instead. This could also be seen in the way the interviewees described their activities and communications about them as being "open for everyone":
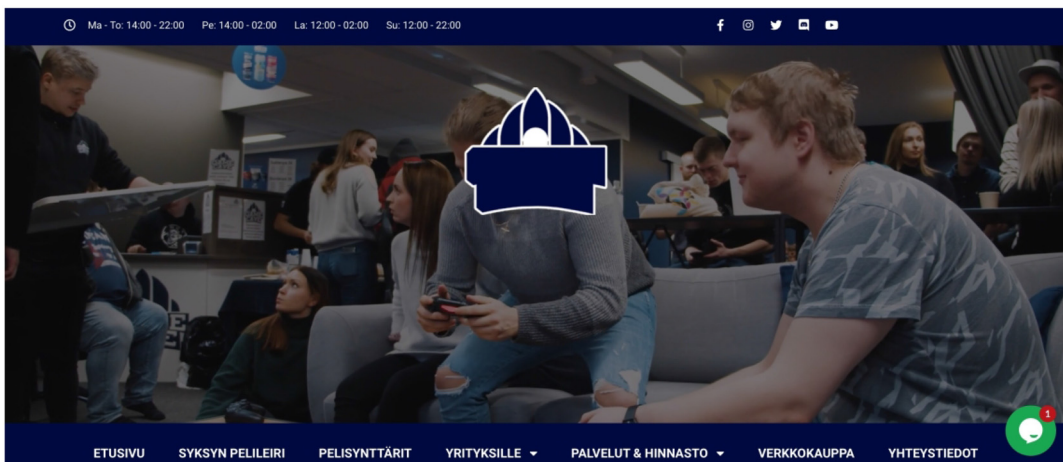

Figure 2 — An example of visual contents in which women were present but only men were playing.

I3: Well, I feel like our [marketing] material and how that is directed, it does not limit in any way, or profile anyone in any way, like "now that you are a man and play CS you can apply to join us." So we have made the material very, like, gender neutral and otherwise neutral [. . . .] And if you think about games and tournaments, we have never organized any men's tournaments or women's tournaments or anything like that, so they have always been open for everyone.

When discussing equity in the interviews, the first participant group often mentioned from this perspective were women and girls. While the DEI contents on organizations' websites that mentioned specific marginalized player groups mentioned women players and players representing sexual minorities, the latter group was not really mentioned in the interviews as a specific target audience.

DEI Practices

Guidelines and Practical Measures. All the organization representatives interviewed for this study were able to name some DEI practices in use in their organization. In our analysis, we placed these DEI practices in three categories: (a) guidelines and practical measures, (b) player behavior, and (c) external communications.

As mentioned earlier, the educational institutions interviewed for this study were required by law to have an equality plan, and that also guided their understanding of the concept of equity. One other organization had produced an equity and equality plan when voluntarily participating in nontoxic certificate training. The organization's representative described it as "mostly a guideline for ourselves, that we would know . . . stick to our values, and know what are the values that we want to follow. In that [nontoxic certificate] training, when I was there, for me, the greatest benefit was to hear from other organizations how they do things and what kind of things they are paying attention to. That provided a fair number of tools and things to think about for our own activities" (I4).

Although the legal requirement of having an equality plan may serve a purpose in sending a message about how these organizations are expected to function, there is a risk that their equity activities will be limited to words on paper not necessarily adopted into the organization's everyday practices. After all, as one organization representative mentioned in the interview, "stating that one is inclusive and actually being inclusive are not necessarily the same thing" (I6). Indeed, when asked directly how the equality plan shows in the activities of their educational organization, one interviewee responded with "Well, I would say it shows in the same way it shows everywhere else: it does not." The representative also explained that while the organization's employees are introduced to the equality plan, "there is not, like, any lecture where they would go through the plan, but it is up to everyone to go through it by themselves, what it means."

When asked about their existing equity practices, the organization representatives described—in addition to equity and equality plans—having different types of guidelines and practical measures to increase equity. These included, for example, having certain rules and practices in place to ensure good behavior within their activities. Examples mentioned included event rules and Codes of Conduct, harassment contact persons present in live events, and strictly moderated Twitch streams to counter online harassment. In addition, the interviewees mentioned inclusion measures in educational organizations such as gender-neutral restrooms and making sure that the students were referred to by their preferred name and pronouns. One player organization representative also described how they have put effort into making their activities free to participate and arranged all funding so that their young players' participation would not depend on their family's financial situation. These were concrete, practical measures the organizations had taken to make their activities more accessible and safer for all participants.

However, there did not seem to be existing practical guidelines for situations such as dealing with discrimination or harassment in all organizations. Some representatives felt that such issues did not currently exist in their organizations, and that they would develop such practices if a need would arise. For example, one interviewee described how "there is unfortunately an alarming amount of misogyny in esports" (I2), but when asked if they have any safety mechanics in place for situations in which one of their women players might encounter such behavior, the interviewee answered that "I suspect that we will only think about that when we will encounter such a situation, when we will have to do that for the first time. I have to admit that I have not had to think about that." In the same vein, another interviewee described, in a very similar manner, how they did not have any written guidelines for dealing with harassment incidents within the organization, because "that has not happened, so luckily we have not had to think about it any more than that" (I4).

Player Behavior. In general, while the interviewees were aware of the existing problematic structures and behaviors in esports, they seemed to think that such issues did not exist within their own organizations. Representatives from player and educational organizations described their own players as "incredibly smart and well behaved" (I2), "well aware of these things" (I4), and "incredibly tolerant and accepting" (I6). These interviewees argued that their players had a very professional attitude toward gaming and knew better than to risk their careers with bad behavior:

I2: Usually when they are playing at that high a level, it is because they are also smart enough to get that high. They know how to behave. [. . .] They have played thousands of hours, they have spent so much time on it, even if they have maybe had a situation like that in the past, they have usually grown over it already at that point, so that they are not out there shouting misogynistic comments or calling people [gay slurs], or anything like that.

Interviewees also described practices they had in use to foster positive player behavior. One interviewee representing an educational institution described how their curriculum includes classes regarding professional behavior—"to make sure our players never end up in one of those headlines about discrimination in esports" (I2). An interviewee representing a player organization described that before having a player sign a contract for their team, they always have a meeting with them to make sure that the player agrees with their values:

I4: With every player we have ever signed for our team, we have gone through our values, that we do not accept racism or bullying of any manner, any of that nonsense, be it on the server or outside of it. As long as you represent us, you are expected to behave according to our values, be it on the internet or in the world outside.

Although the interviewees did not seem to expect their own players to engage in any negative behavior, they listed some measures their organizations were taking to protect their own players against harassment from outsiders, including coaching

their players on how to deal with such behavior. One player organization representative also described their practices dealing with any bad behavior encountered by their players:

> I5: We have had cases where our players have sent us, for example, a screenshot, or told us that this kind of stuff has happened, that they feel like something is not ok . . . . And all those situations have been handled . . . . We have, of course, discussed them, but the players have also wished that the information will also be sent to the other end [. . .] that it will be made known. Not by making a public fuss about it, but by dealing with it appropriately.

> So, I have also personally sent those messages, telling someone that their player has done X, Y, Z, whatever the situation has been, and to league organizers too, even about some things that I have not been sure . . . . Like, that I am not sure if this is something you wish to be informed about, but to me this does not seem appropriate. And they have all been received well and I know that some of them have even led to sanctions. So, we continue to encourage our players to tell us and to take screenshots [about these incidents], so it is easier to prove that this has happened, that this is not ok.

External Communications. In addition to the DEI practices focusing on their own players and participants described above, the interviewees also described their organizations' DEI practices aimed outward, focusing on expanding their current participant group and audience. Regarding their organization's currently narrow participant demographic, one event organization representative described how they had aimed to widen their audience by widening the scope of their event program.

> I1: The number of women (in participants) is on the rise, and that is a really good thing. It is something that we still wish for, more and more, and in our perspective, it is an outcome of our other activities, not necessarily so much from gaming. It might come from things like cosplay, streaming, things like that, and that is what we might then also want to do more of, to put more effort into that, so that we would also have program that does not revolve around gaming, so that would attract [other kinds of audiences] . . . . And well, we are continuously taking those actions and planning what we could do to further widen it [the event audience] [. . . .] But it is of course somehow related to digital life and computers and things like that, so there probably will not be any fitness competitions there . . . .

The same organization had also included programs focused on gender inclusion in their events and collaborated with other organizations focusing on DEI questions to attract more women participants.

Some organization representatives described how they paid special attention to their external communications so that they would be as inclusive as possible:

> I5: We consider our word choices, so that we would not have slip-ups with something exclusive that would make people feel like this is not for them. Certainly concerning the images we use, we also aim to . . . . That they would at least not be exclusive towards anyone, or make anyone feel insulted, or anything like that. So, they are pretty neutral, if you can say that [. . . .] For example, doing event promotion, I browsed through all the pictures we had from our previous events to see if there would be any in which you would not necessarily know

what gender the player represents, those kinds of things we do think of.

At the same time, the interviewees also pointed out that when promoting their organization, they are using photos of their current activities, which means that their visual representation reflects their current participant demographic. On the other hand, one interviewee also pointed out that when they are casting for streams, they are trying to pay special attention to diversity of presenters, "so that we would have as much diversity as possible in the content we produce, because in my perspective, it is also our responsibility to bring that forward" (I1). However, the interviewee clarified that this was not a principle written down anywhere, but instead "it is more based on a joint understanding [within the organization], that this is how these things are advanced."

DEI Challenges

When discussing challenges that the organizations faced when aiming to increase DEI in their activities, it seemed that the organizations generally struggled with the reality of Finnish esports as a field dominated by men of a certain age. They all seemed to wish to see a change toward a more diverse scene, but at the same time felt that they did not have the power to make that change happen. The main challenges described by the interviewees, in many different ways, were related to the toxicity prevalent in esports and gaming environments, as well as the narrow idea of an esports player. As mentioned earlier, the problems of toxicity, discrimination, and harassment were described as something existing outside their own organizations, as something they had to find means to protect their players and participants from—through rules and guidelines, coaching, Twitch moderation, and other practical measures.

Interviewed organization representatives also seemed to consider it an issue that their current player and participant demographics were quite narrow—mostly consisting of young men who were avid gamers—and had also taken some measures to widen them. However, in this area, too, they saw the problem lying elsewhere: in the more general stereotype of an esports player and the overall narrow demographic of esports participants. Several interviewees mentioned these as problems that would require a wider cultural change that would then also benefit their own organization.

Because of the current limited participant demographic in the organizations and esports in general, the organizations also struggled with reaching new audiences with their communications, thus making it more difficult to expand their current group of participants. The organizations described being active in several esports and gaming events and on social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram, but through these channels, they only seemed to reach people already interested in esports:

> I5: If you think of us as an organization, if we communicate in our Twitter and [Instagram], for example, that we have an open call for a team, if you take our followers and exclude our players' mothers, sisters, and girlfriends, then after that maybe 95% of them are men, so it is pretty clear that then those who apply probably also come from those groups, so in a way . . . . We should somehow think about what would then be the channel that would allow us to reach girls, for example, or those who do not speak Finnish as their first language in the first place.

It is worth noting that the organizations were, for the most part, also running on very limited resources. As one interviewee, whose organization was running solely on volunteer labor, pointed out:

I5: We have discussed if there would be a need to specifically target groups that are not currently participating in our activities, but we have not really done that. And, on the other hand, if we would do that, we would need to have something to offer them. And at the moment, we are already having to respond to all requests about joining one of our teams to play with "no can do," unfortunately, that we cannot take a single player more. So, in that sense it also has not been a current question for us in a while.

Discussion

In this study, through analyzing these organizations' websites and interviews with selected organizations' representatives, we have examined how Finnish esports organizations communicate and practice DEI, and what kinds of challenges these organizations have experienced in this area.

Regarding the Finnish esports organizations' websites, we analyzed both their textual and visual contents from the perspective of communicating DEI—or exclusion. Out of the 53 esports websites we analyzed, 26 included some type of DEI content. We defined five different DEI content categories found on the websites: (a) DEI documents, (b) statements and practices, (c) values and goals, (d) rules and guidelines (e.g., Codes of Conduct), and (e) activity descriptions. Many of these DEI contents focused on participant behavior, by emphasizing the value of sportsmanship and fair play, but also by setting rules and guidelines for participants to follow. This is not surprising, as the existing research literature on this topic too emphasizes the role of player behavior in DEI issues in esports (Choi et al., 2020; Friman & Ruotsalainen, 2022; Pauketat, 2022; Ruotsalainen & Friman, 2018; Ruvalcaba et al., 2018; Siutila & Havaste, 2019; Witkowski, 2018)—and rules and guidelines as a solution for improving the situation (Amazan-Hall et al., 2018; Pauketat, 2022). Among the websites we examined, only the national esports representative, the Finnish Esports Federation, presented specific action plans for increasing equity, diversity, and inclusion in the organization's activities, through their public equity and equality plan and a guide for organizing accessible esports events.

In terms of participant diversity, these organizations did not, for the most part, speak to specific marginalized player groups through their websites, but rather followed a general "everyone is welcome" narrative. Similar tendency of aiming to communicate inclusion without addressing anyone in particular and, as such, not really communicating *inclusively* was also noted by Taylor and Stout (2020) in their study on North American collegiate esports organizations. When specific defining factors were mentioned in this regard in our material, they were more often participant age and skill level, and less often gender (women in particular, but also gender minorities more rarely) and sexual orientation. This is a significant finding, as women and players representing sexual and gender minorities are consistently underrepresented in esports and targeted with systematic discrimination and harassment (Choi et al., 2020; Darvin et al., 2021; Friman & Ruotsalainen, 2022; Groen, 2013; Ruotsalainen & Friman, 2018; Ruvalcaba et al., 2018; Siutila & Havaste, 2019; Ståhl & Rusk, 2020; Witkowski, 2018). Notably, players of color were not generally included in these contents at all, even though they are known to be discriminated against in these environments as well (Fletcher, 2020; Gray, 2020; Zhu, 2018).

Alongside DEI contents, we also looked for contents that would exclude certain participants. Here, we found that participants were mainly excluded for two types of reasons: (a) player skill level and (b) nationality and language. We did not interpret these as arbitrary or discriminatory restrictions as such, as they seemed to be directly connected to the nature of these organizations' activities (competitive play requiring a certain skill level) as well as the location and language of their operations (in Finland and in Finnish or Swedish). However, it is worth noting here that describing an organization's target audience as "all Finns" can be read as exclusive toward those who are not Finnish citizens or have not been born in the country, whether this is the organization's intention or not. After all, just like in traditional sports, nationalism, and ethnic and racial discrimination sometimes are intertwined in esports in problematic ways (Zhu, 2018). On the other hand, it is also worth noting that exclusion may sometimes be used as a tool to support inclusion of groups that are otherwise underrepresented. For example, Swedish-speaking Finns are a minority in Finland, and esports organizations operating in this language can be viewed as supporting the participation of this group in esports—even though it might exclude Finnish-speaking participants from these specific contexts. Furthermore, while we mainly looked for materials communicating explicit exclusion in our analysis, it is also important to pay attention to implicit exclusion, to the potential participant groups that are not mentioned, or are either constantly underrepresented in or completely missing from these communications. This kind of implicit exclusion was present in the websites' visual contents.

The visual representation of esports players and other participants on the Finnish esports organizations' websites did not actively communicate openness to diversity of participants. With some exceptions, the visual representation of a Finnish esport player was generally in line with the ideal esport player described by Witkowski (2018): a White, young, able-bodied, cis-gendered (and assumedly heterosexual) man. As such, there seems to be a mismatch between the visual representation and the, albeit limited, existing DEI goals communicated on the websites of Finnish esports organizations. While visual representation can be changed by the members of a particular group (e.g., Rodriguez, 2020), organizations also have a responsibility to examine the visual material on their website and consider how it can be seen as inclusive or exclusive toward different participant groups.

Analyzing the visual materials on the Finnish esports organizations' websites, we also found some cases in which minority participants (in this case women and participants representing ethnic minorities) were represented in the material but in problematic ways. It is important to note that equitable and inclusive visual representation of diverse participant groups is not only a question of if these groups are represented but also, at least as importantly, how they are represented. In the worst case, problematic representation may further increase the marginalization of these participant groups, who may already feel pressure to navigate a careful balance between performances of their personal identity and one of a competitive and marketable esports athlete (Fletcher, 2020; Witkowski, 2018).

Through the visual analysis, we were also able to recognize a situated "esports aesthetic" prevalent throughout the website material, simultaneously communicating masculinity, technology, and athleticism. Our finding echoes those made by Rambusch (2010), who has noted that websites dedicated to esports communities are

centered around discourses of professionalism and athleticism. In a reading of one such website, Rambusch noted how

> the community wants to establish itself as serious, dedicated, and mature with a clear goal and purpose in mind; the conversion of leisure activity into an accepted sport with chances for practitioners to make a living off of playing the game (p. 114).

Overall, this prevalent "esports aesthetic" has received very limited academic interest and is a concept we recommend further research on.

In the same way than the websites of Finnish esports organizations seemed to communicate toward a narrow participant demographic, in the interviews with representatives from selected Finnish esports organizations, we found that these organizations too viewed young, esports-enthusiastic men as their primary target audience—even though, according to the respondents, this was rather due to existing circumstances than as a conscious choice on their part. Indeed, the interviewees considered the narrow participant demographic in esports, within and outside their own organizations, as problematic. Of the participant groups currently not as present in their activities as the organizations would hope them to be, the interviewees most often mentioned women and girls. This might be because the discrimination women and girls encounter in esports and gaming in general has been a topic of much discussion—and academic research—in the past decade (Choi et al., 2020; Darvin et al., 2021; Fox & Tang, 2017; Friman & Ruotsalainen, 2022; Groen, 2013; Richard & Gray, 2018; Ruotsalainen & Friman, 2018; Ruvalcaba et al., 2018; Siutila & Havaste, 2019; Witkowski, 2018). However, when analyzing the written and visual contents on the Finnish esports organizations' websites, we did not find a lot of content that would have communicated to this group specifically.

Based on the interviews, the organizations seemed to have a positive attitude toward increasing DEI both in their own activities and in esports in general. The respondents listed several existing DEI practices that were in use in their organizations. However, they did not always have a clear definition for equity, especially from the perspective of their organization specifically. All but one organization whose representatives were interviewed for the study had a written equity and/or equality plan. However, in the case of educational organizations, it was a document required by law and did not concern their activities specifically, whereas the organization that had created one voluntarily had customized the plan to fit their goals and needs. Based on this, it seems that it would be important to draft these documents based on the organization's values and to make sure that these values are known, shared, and followed by everyone participating in the organization's activities. Echoing similar findings made by Taylor and Stout (2020), it is also important that these guidelines are written in a clear and practical manner, and that they are made both explicit and actionable. In the same vein, it is important that these guidelines are easily available (Taylor & Stout, 2020). This too is a way to communicate DEI to potential participants. One of the organizations interviewed for this study did this by having a meeting with each potential new team member, to discuss the organization's values and have the player commit to them when signing their player contract.

From the perspective of the organizations interviewed for this study, the main DEI challenges in esports were related to the toxicity prevalent in esports and gaming environments, and the narrow idea of an esports player—both of them issues that are well documented in esports research (Pauketat, 2022). Notably, they did not seem to think that these issues concerned their organizations specifically, but rather esports in general. This was the case even though these issues were reflected in their practices in the form of,

for example, experiencing the need to protect their players from harmful behavior inflicted by others. Reflecting upon similar findings made in their study, Taylor and Stout (2020) argued that the lack of identity-based interpersonal conflict (e.g., sexist or racist behavior) experienced within esports organizations is more likely a consequence of the narrow participant demographic than existing good practices and guidelines focused on preventing these issues. Based on how some of the interviewees of this study told us that they do not have practices in place to handle such cases within their organization because they have never needed to implement them, our findings support the same interpretation. However, the organizations also described training and supporting their players in dealing with toxic behavior when playing. Pauketat (2022) described organizing this kind of training to teach players to resist inappropriate behaviors online as one of the key strategies in building more inclusive esports environments.

Conclusions

Main Results

Based on the website contents and interview material we analyzed in this study, Finnish esports organizations seem to be aware of existing issues that are negatively impacting DEI in this scene, and they have also made some practical efforts to improve the situation in their own activities. However, there seemed to be some inconsistency between how the organization representatives described their wishes for increased DEI in esports, and the communications and practices deployed by Finnish esports organizations as a whole. In earlier research, it has been noted that some esports organizations are struggling to recognize inequities within their operations (Pigott et al., 2023), and, even when these issues are acknowledged, practical efforts for improving the situation are still regrettably rare (Taylor & Stout, 2020)—with some notable exceptions (see Amazan-Hall et al., 2018).

Based on the communications on the organizations' websites, the Finnish esports scene does not, for the most part, seem to target, or take steps into lowering the threshold of participation for marginalized participant groups. In general, the websites did not include communications targeting marginalized player groups specifically, they did not provide clear descriptions of the DEI goals set or actions taken by the organizations, and their visual imagery presented esports activities as a field largely reserved for young, able-bodied, White men.

However, in the interviews with the organization representatives, all emphasized their wish for greater diversity in esports, both within their organization and in general. Yet, they had a strong experience of lacking the power, tools, and resources to initiate that change. Practical challenges concerning DEI practices within the interviewed organizations were—in addition to those related to efforts to counter player harassment—lack of resources and tools for reaching and including new participant groups beyond those already involved in the organization's activities.

Practical Implications

Based on our analysis, for esports organizations aiming to increase their DEI, their work toward this goal should focus on three key areas: (a) communication, (b) recruitment, and (c) guidelines. In terms of communication, it is important for esports organizations to consider what kind of participant groups are currently missing from their activities and if their communications actively present the

organization as an inclusive and equitable environment for those participants. Organizations should consider how they are communicating about their values and practices, and who are included as active participants in their visual communications. Moreover, it is important to note that representation is not only a question of who are (or are not) represented, but also how they are represented, as problematic representation may enforce marginalization instead of inclusion.

Recruitment is a key practice in increasing diversity in esports (Pauketat, 2022; Pigott et al., 2023; Taylor & Stout, 2020). One constant issue that is both a source and a consequence of the narrow participant demographic in esports is that all activities and opportunities seem to be targeted for those who have already crossed the initial participation threshold a long time ago and have been able to develop their skill and experience accordingly. In their study on collegiate esports organizations in North America, Taylor and Stout (2020) noted, instead of recruiting diverse players with potential and training them to develop their skill, varsity teams were focusing their recruitment efforts on those who had already gained professional experience. These tend to be players who fit well within the current hegemony instead of having to constantly struggle against it.

This issue derives, in part, from the culture of toxic meritocracy in esports (Fletcher, 2020; Friman & Ruotsalainen, 2022; Paul, 2018; Ruotsalainen & Friman, 2018; Siutila & Havaste, 2019; Taylor & Stout, 2020). Organizations may believe that they are being "objective" and fair while focusing their recruitment efforts on the most skillful individuals—while some also worry about the danger of "tokenism" if individual backgrounds would be considered (Taylor & Stout, 2020). However, talented players may never receive the opportunity to develop their skills up to the required level if their pathway is cut early on by discrimination and harassment. Importantly, building a larger talent pool at an early stage will also benefit the entire esports scene—from the grassroots to the highest level of competition—in the long run. Especially amateur esports organizations have a key role to play here, as these environments may be able to offer better conditions for increasing diversity than professional scenes due to their variation in skill levels and degrees of commitment (Taylor & Stout, 2020).

Besides recruiting and fostering the development of more diverse talent, it is crucial that esports organizations also have practices in place to support equal and safe participation for everyone. Hayday and Collison (2020) noted that when considering social inclusion in esports, attention should be paid to not only participation, but also the quality of the experience, and that all participants' rights should be equally invested in and promoted. To make esports more inclusive and equitable for diverse player groups, it is important to show that they are welcome to join and will be able to participate without fear of harassment, discrimination, or other forms of toxic behavior. This can be done through guidelines such as Codes of Conduct. However, it is important that these guidelines are not just generalized documents drafted to fill administrative requirements, but customized to fit each organization's values and needs, and that they are both explicit and actionable (Taylor & Stout, 2020). This means that the guidelines should be available to all participants, they should be easy to understand and follow, and there are clear procedures in place for situations in which the guidelines are broken. Importantly, these guidelines and practices do not function only as a means to prevent and to react to negative behavior, but they also make participants feel protected by offering tools for reporting harassment and institutionalized support for handling any such situations (Pauketat, 2022).

In the same way as traditional sports, esports often reinforce existing inequalities, but can also facilitate resistance and transformation. If esports organizations would put more effort into finding and recruiting potential talents from diverse backgrounds and use their resources to train them and support them, as well as into building safer environments for training and competing, we might start to see a rise of new talent, encouraged by examples of successful players but also witnessing environments where participants do not need to fear hostility and harassment targeted against their identity (Pauketat, 2022; Taylor & Stout, 2020). Different types of esports organizations have a central role to play in this, as their activities and communications have the opportunity of reaching a great number of potential participants.

Limitations and Future Directions

The main limitations of this study are related to its research material and national context. We chose to analyze esports organizations' websites because they include a variety of content, in many forms, related to the organizations' operations, and, as such, offered rich material for our analysis. However, it is worth noting that esports organizations communicate on multiple platforms (e.g., Twitter, Twitch, Discord), which means that our analysis only covers a section of these organizations' communications. In addition, this study is focused on one national and cultural context: Finland. This is a limitation in the sense that its results may not be fully applicable to other environments. However, this is also a strength, as there is a need for more studies focusing on national and local esports cultures and ecosystems.

During this research process, we have identified three areas particularly worth exploring in future research. First, much of the existing research on DEI questions in esports—and gaming in general—is focused on the problematic cultures, practices, and behaviors in this field, and how they specially target certain participant groups (Choi et al., 2019; Darvin et al., 2021; Fletcher, 2020; Friman & Ruotsalainen, 2022; Gray, 2020; Groen, 2013; Ruotsalainen & Friman, 2018; Ruvalcaba et al., 2018; Siutila & Havaste, 2019; Ståhl & Rusk, 2020; Witkowski, 2018; Zhu, 2018). While there are also publications exploring potential solutions to improve the current situation (Amazan-Hall et al., 2018; Pauketat, 2022; Taylor & Stout, 2020), these are still somewhat rare, and there is a clear need for more work in this area—also from the perspective of societal impact through providing esports organizations with research-based recommendations to support their DEI practices. Second, although esports is a global phenomenon, esports organizations operate in specific local, cultural, and national contexts. To better understand the complexity of esports as a cultural phenomenon and the great variety in the existing esports ecosystems, it would be beneficial to gain insight into these local developments, both through in-depth case studies and comparative studies. Finally, we have noted a lack of research on the visual culture of esports, specifically on the "esports aesthetic" we noticed while analyzing the organizations' websites. There is a need for studies examining how the aesthetic culture of esports is constructed, also from the perspective of considering the implications of chosen aesthetics to DEI within this scene. All in all, to support positive developments in DEI in esports, more research, but also practical actions, are needed—preferably in close dialogue and collaboration between researchers, esports organizations, players, and other participants.

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