Breaking the Glass Monitor: Examining the Underrepresentation of Women in eSports Environments

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While the growth of esports is undeniable, access, inclusivity, and diversity within this space is lagging. Indeed, the esports environment is reminiscent of the pre-Title IX era for traditional sports environments. The esports industry is predominantly male, as women and girls represent a lower proportion of participants, fans, and employees. To that end, the male-driven toxicity in esports poses a major threat to the growth and legitimacy of the industry (Smith, 2019). A twitter thread in June 2020, which detailed more than 70 allegations of sexism and harassment in the gaming industry (Lorenz & Browning, 2020) once again sparked the need for the industry to take action to address the noxiousness that permeates. While previous work has been informative on harassment and the subsequent experiences of women in traditional sport (e.g., basketball, hockey: Fastin, Brackenridge, & Walseth, 2007; Hindman & Walker, 2020; Taylor, Harden, & Rode, 2017), these occurrences have not been examined with sufficient depth in esports. Further, to our knowledge, only a few studies within the esports industry have identified the existence of hostility and discrimination for esport participants (e.g., Cameron, 2019; Darvin, Vooris, & Mahoney, 2020; Holden, Baker & Edelman, 2020; Ruvalcaba, Shulze, Kim, Berzenski, & Otten, 2018), and as such our study sought to expand upon these investigations through uncovering the career experiences of professional women within the esports workplace.

Therefore, this study serves as the first to examine the career experiences and challenges faced by professional women gamers and c-suite women executives in the gaming industry in an effort to further understand the underrepresentation that sustains for women and girls. This investigation employed a generic, qualitative approach, suitable to investigate an individual’s reports of their subjective opinions, attitudes, beliefs, and reflections of their experiences (Percy, Kostere, & Kostere, 2015). In an effort to examine and further expose the underrepresentation of girls and women throughout the highest levels of the esports industry, and abiding by similar previous qualitative research tactics (e.g., Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Darvin, 2020; Kafle, 2011) the current investigation was led by one open-ended research question: What are the career experiences of elite-level women gamers and executives throughout the esports industry?

In order to investigate this underrepresentation, an international sample of 10 women esports competitors, content creators, and executives advanced our understanding of both the career experiences and career obstacles they encounter. Following the interview and data analysis procedures several themes emerged including (1) ‘breaking the glass monitor,’ (2) toxic ‘geek’ masculinity, (3) hostile sport environments, and (4) ‘mental’ (e.g., grit). Through these themes, our results provide practical and theoretical contributions. Theoretically, as the first qualitative study to examine the business side of women’s lived experience in the esport workplace, we revealed men were the privileged group and geek masculinity was bolstered by the environment (Dellinger, 2004). Practically, similar to Hindman and Walker’s (2020) revelation of overt sexism in the sport workplace, each segment of the esport ecosystem must address the pervasive harassment to create an inclusive environment and continued growth of the industry.