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Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture
Volume 15, issue 1, pp. 183–207

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Abstract

Esports in Portugal have been growing steadily in recent years. As in many other countries, women are significantly underrepresented in Portuguese esports. New studies with Portuguese students show conservative views towards gender roles and disinterest in prioritising diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), which contrasts with the global tendency to incorporate it in the industry. Lately, initiatives promoting DEI have populated the esports landscape. However, the communities’ response, which may impact effectiveness, remains under-examined. This work is part of a larger ethnographic project that aims to understand how the esports communities in Portugal perceive and react to DEI initiatives such as women-only tournaments or harassment awareness campaigns. This paper will discuss findings from the thematic analysis of 10 interviews with Portuguese members of an esports community. The recurring themes were (1) DEI initiatives are imposed; (2) Portugal is too small to care (about DEI); (3) nepotism; (4) self-preservation; and (5) ubiquity of online toxicity.

Keywords

Esports; diversity, equity & inclusion; Portuguese esports; online toxicity; women in games

Women—or rather, anyone who does not identify as a cisgender man—have been consistently locked out of gaming and esports as emerging cultural spaces. Multiple barriers have contributed to this; for instance, the historical marketing of videogames to boys since the 80s (Kirkpatrick, 2013), which led to “both girls and boys thought video game machines were ‘boy things’” by the 90s (Laurel in Cassel & Jenkins, 1998, p. 119). With online games, girls and women became aware of this gatekeeping culture as they endured abuse due to their gender (Fox & Tang, 2017), with livestreaming, they started getting more comments about their physical appearance than about their gaming performance (Nakandala et al., 2016), and thus

many girls and women who play, prefer to mask their gender using masculine-sounding usernames or avoiding voice chats (Cote, 2017). Due to this historical imbalance, some suggest gender segregation as a temporary solution to create safe spaces for women to compete in (MissHarvey in Chaloner, 2020) while hoping for “a world where mixed teams are simply normal” (Hiltscher 2023). Nonetheless, a multi-pronged approach including workshops with stakeholders and providing best practice recommendations for industry folks seems to be the better option (AnyKey, 2015; Anykey, 2017; Taylor in Lowood, 2019).

Lately, initiatives for diversity, equity and inclusion (herein DEI) have populated the esports landscape; however, the communities’ response remains under-examined. In this paper, we engage with the definition of DEI set forth by Friman et al (2024) “describing an intention for building environments where all kinds of people are welcome, are treated fairly, and have an equal opportunity for participation and agency.” (p.481). In practical terms, DEI initiatives in esports are often events such as tournaments, video campaigns, moderating tools, and resources for esports. Examples of such initiatives are the promotion of LGBTQIA+ streamers on the Activision Blizzard (herein Blizzard) launcher,¹ tournaments for teams of marginalised genders such as Calling All Heroes (Blizzard Entertainment, 2024), or campaigns such as Sky’s partnership with Guild Esports’ No Room for Abuse campaign.²

AnyKey is a non-profit advocacy organisation that has published extensive work in that direction, aiming to establish how DEI can be implemented in esports (AnyKey, 2015). While their work contributes to a growing body of knowledge, it does not analyse diversity in different cultural contexts, which this project aims to do. Anykey’s resources are said to be applicable to different cultural contexts, but these do not consider cultural dimensions that can aid or hinder their adoption and/or effectiveness. This is one of the main contributions of the present paper: to understand the extent to which international DEI initiatives are applicable in different cultural settings from the ones they were developed in.

The present work addresses various gaps in the literature. The interviews have the goal of exploring how DEI initiatives are seen in a competitive OW community. The dearth of research on how non-Anglocentric communities navigate hurdles related to DEI, grants this work its novel and vital character through empirical research. The following section contextualises this study discussing the status quo of esports and of DEI in Portugal. Within the Method section, the interview protocol, participant recruitment, ethical considerations, and analysis of data collected are explained. The Themes section will expand on the data analysis utilising data segments from the

¹ Blizzard’s software application used to install and start games on the PC.

² Video campaign ‘No Room for Abuse’ launched in 2023 on Twitch.tv and other platforms: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fC0yzzCWKG4&t=2s&ab_channel=Sky

interviews conducted. This is followed by a discussion of findings, limitations and future work, and a conclusion.

Portugal

Portugal is an opportune place to study DEI in esports because its esports scene is still under development in an underexplored national context. Hofstede’s cultural dimensions model (Hofstede Insights, 2024; Minkov & Kaasa, 2022) indicates that Portugal has an incredibly high score of ‘uncertainty avoidance’, meaning resistance to change, which might be useful in understanding the country’s outlook on esports as a nascent industry and on DEI.

Studying Portugal in the context of gender diversity is particularly insightful due to the persistent influence of patriarchal attitudes within its society (M. Ferreira et al., 2022). These attitudes continue to shape various aspects of gender relations, from the workplace to home (EIGE, 2023; INE, 2020). Exploring gender diversity in such a context can provide valuable insights into the challenges and progress associated with gender equality in a modern yet traditionally influenced society.

DEI in Portugal

To understand a country’s equity and diversity ethos, and given the sportification aspect of esports³, it is useful to look at how a country navigates equity and diversity in traditional sports. Football is immensely popular in Portugal. An adage of the Portuguese culture is “*Football, Fado & Fátima*” referring to the cultural aspects which are dearest to the Portuguese: the sport, the national musical genre, and the religion.⁴ The international success Portuguese footballers⁵ have amassed over decades, could perhaps explain the further investment and continued interest by the population. Further, these examples serve as role models for young boys and their fathers; whereas the lack of female role models is often cited as a reason behind the low numbers of women professional players (Romine, 2019).

Women’s football in Portugal has always been neglected, however, there has been a recent push to raise its profile. This includes the establishment of a broadcasting network that connects all stadiums where women’s football is played, which enables the livestreaming of games to a broader audience (UEFA.com, 2022). The Portuguese

³ Sportification refers to the adoption of language, imagery, and structures from traditional sports (McMullan and Miller 2008).

⁴ Fátima is a city in Portugal where a religious Saint supposedly appeared, originating the myth.

⁵ For instance: Cristiano Ronaldo, Luís Figo, Eusébio da Silva Ferreira.

women's national football team qualified for the 2023 World Cup, which further enhanced the sport's prominence in the country (Marmé, 2023). At the time, a Portuguese bank released a marketing campaign to support the team. The posters depicted an athlete with a football under her jersey which, in football context, is a common celebratory practice. However, in the context of the video campaign, it was a reference to pregnancy. The campaign was received with a mixture of praise and criticism as it reproduces essentialist gender stereotypes.

Some recent studies with higher education students in Portuguese game-related degrees show that improving equity and diversity in the nation's gaming industry is not seen as a priority (Lima & Gouveia, 2020). Issues such as representation in games are dismissed and gender essentialist stereotypes reinforced in these participants' discourse. Researchers have identified three types of fallacies in perceptions and beliefs the Portuguese have about the gaming industry: the fallacy that game development always requires programming skills, that it is unprofitable or unviable as a career, and that it is a profession suited for men (Lima et al., 2021). Interestingly, in their 2020 paper, Lima & Gouveia, highlighted a theme in the participants' discourse which they termed 'sensitivities of interest'. Unpacking this concept, it seems that participants were reinforcing the idea that women do not tend to develop an interest in exploring the nuances of the gaming technology. This further reinforces the notion that there is a strong adherence to gender stereotypes in Portugal, especially when it comes to videogames.

Esports in Portugal

The esports industry in Portugal has been growing steadily in recent years, with an increasing number of tournaments, teams, and players participating in various esports titles (Cardoso, 2021; C. Ferreira, 2019). Data regarding the number of esports tournaments happening in Portugal has not yet been systematically documented. Below, figure 1 shows a representation of this trend though it is not exhaustive.

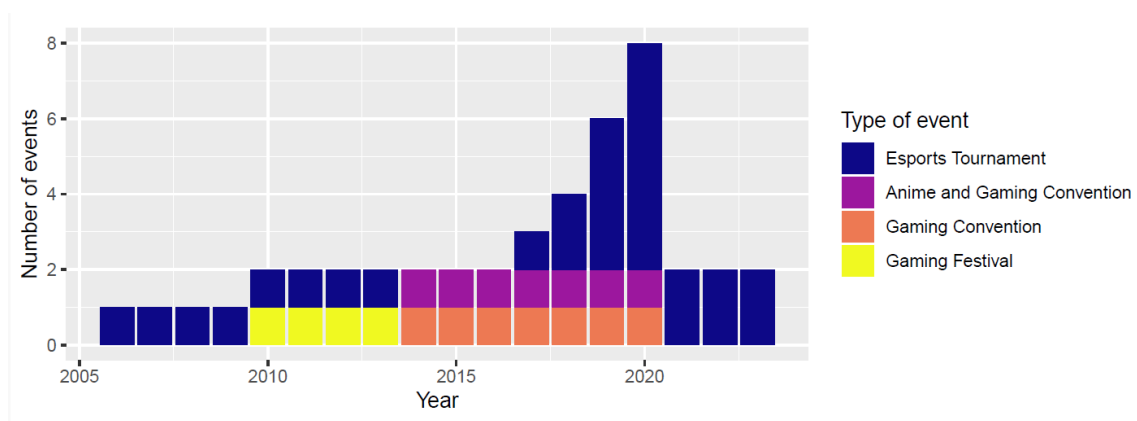


Figure 1. Number of gaming and esports events in Portugal in the last decades.

Lisboa Games Week, one of the biggest gaming events in the country was inaugurated in 2014 and has been including even more esports competitions in its programme. Other regions in Portugal have followed their footsteps and started their own gaming events with small tournaments, e.g. Óbidos Village Gaming (central region) or Street Gaming Cantanhede (north region).

In terms of equity and diversity, the Portuguese esports industry, like in many other countries, has been struggling to overcome a considerable gender gap. Women are significantly underrepresented both in Portuguese esports (Monteiro, 2021) and the national game development industry (Gil, 2022; WPGI, 2022). Efforts to address this issue have been somewhat superficial. While events like Lisboa Games Week and Comic Con Portugal have dedicated areas for women in gaming, these initiatives often fail to address the deeper cultural and structural barriers that prevent women from fully participating in esports (Passos, 2022; Women in Games, 2022). Panels and discussions are valuable, but they need to be coupled with tangible changes in hiring practices, support for marginalised genders, and visibility in major tournaments to make a real difference.

GIRLGAMER, a women-only international tournament, is owned by a Portuguese company. It exemplifies this gap between intention and impact. Despite organizing a notable event in Lisbon in 2018, the absence of Portuguese teams underscores the lack of development and support for female gamers within the country (C. Ferreira, 2019; Saraiva, 2013). This failure to nurture local talent points to a broader issue of inadequate grassroots support and mentorship for women in esports. The Portuguese *Overwatch 2* (OW; Activision Blizzard, 2022) team's participation in Blizzard's *Overwatch World Cup* without female players (Pedersen, 2019) highlights the community's apparent gender bias, showing resistance to change.

Exploring the themes that emerge when members of the Portuguese esports community discuss equity and diversity is crucial for understanding the underlying challenges and opportunities within the industry in this specific cultural context. Addressing these issues is essential for fostering a sustainable and equitable esports ecosystem in Portugal, aligning with broader global efforts to promote diversity and inclusion in competitive gaming.

Method

Overwatch 2 (OW, Activision Blizzard 2022) is a team-based first-person shooter esport. The game was chosen for this study because its developer introduced, since its inception (*Overwatch*, 2016), multiple DEI initiatives such as a diverse roster of characters and more recently tournaments exclusively for teams of marginalised genders (Blizzard Entertainment, 2024). Portugal has a small, dedicated community of OW casual, amateur, and professional players. The authors interviewed past and

present members of the Overwatch Portugal (OWPT) Discord community. This community was chosen not only due to the researcher's familiarity with the community and the game, but also because OW has been hailed as having one of the most diverse character rosters in first-person shooters as well as having the most diverse userbase (Välisalo & Ruotsalainen, 2019; Yee, 2017).

The size of the community is relevant in ethically approaching this study. As part of a larger ethnographic study, the interview data was handled carefully to avoid identification of participants given the small size of the population. I.e. anonymisation went beyond the typical participant pseudonym, avoiding naming specific tournaments and other Portuguese esports scenes beyond OW, which participants mentioned.

Ten semi-structured, respondent interviews were conducted online in August 2023 to investigate what themes could be identified when members of the Portuguese esports community talk about equity and diversity. The interviews lasted from 50 minutes to 1h37min. Three participants identified as women, four as men, one as non-binary, one as a trans woman, and one as genderfluid. The participants' ages ranged from 21 to 34. They had currently or formerly worked in esports professionally or in grassroots organisations. This method fits the research purpose and the sample as respondents had similar positions within the community but different personal experiences, which could be expanded upon through a semi-structured protocol (Tracy, 2020).

In the participant information sheet and consent form, the following description is included: "This study aims to understand the experience of esports fans in relation to diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in esports communities. Specifically, to understand esports fans' views of DEI such as female-only tournaments." The interviews have the goal of uncovering how DEI initiatives are perceived in competitive OW communities. Using a semi-structured protocol, the interviews enabled participants to expand on their views and talk more broadly about internal and external factors that may impact their participation in esports. Some of the prompts were: what brought them to OW; their role in esports; challenges in the role/organisation/in esports in general; are esports a sport; gender segregation; views on specific DEI initiatives; diversity in organisations where you work(ed). Interview protocol in [Appendix 1](#).

By internal and external factors, we understand 'internal factors' as internal to the individual (participants' first-person perspectives) or internal to the community; and 'external factors' as external to the individual (e.g., family or financial pressure) or external to the community (but within esports) such as pressure to be a role model, or to represent the country. The interview questions focused both on social aspects as well as material and technological aspects of participants' experiences. Thematic Analysis (TA) enables a deeper exploration of specific themes, offering a better view

of how particular interactions, roles, and influences that contribute to esports as a phenomenon.

As per Braun and Clarke (2022) themes identified in the interviews were not merely commonly occurring but transmitted importance and significant meaning, relative to the subject matter. Coding was achieved through the strategy called ‘3-level coding’ (Langdrige and Hagger-Johnson 2013). The first level is concerned with *what* is being talked about; the second level with *how* it is being talked about; and the third level brings in theory and external knowledge to help identify patterns in the codes from previous levels.

Themes

1. Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives as imposed and unproductive

DEI were seen by participants as being artificially imposed on them for two reasons. On the one hand, Blizzard is seen to be sanitising their own public image⁶ and, on the other hand, the developer is perceived to be adopting social justice narratives and strategies which have become trendy in order to increase their own popularity.

This view was shared about different types of initiatives. First, Blizzard including streamers of marginalised gender identities in its client: “The first thought people have when they see this [...] is that ‘this person’s here just because they are marginalised. They were put here on Blizzard’s client just for that.’ And it reinforces a horrible mindset” (P6).

The above segment displays some negative attitudes towards something that resembles a quota system. After seeing that Blizzard is promoting players of marginalised genders, their merit for being promoted is negated by their identity. Additionally, P6 also suggested that prioritising social justice via this type of initiative may exacerbate negative behaviours towards marginalised folks in esports.

If now they [Overwatch] added like 30 different heroes and they all had uncommon identities people would be like ‘OK I wanna play the game, and this is starting with obstacles that... like, I want to play a normal game, [...] I don't need all this’. (P8)

⁶ After a lawsuit related to sexual harassment accusations was made public recently.

P8 suggested the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ characters in OW is unusual and unexpected, potentially deterring people from playing the game. The segment also suggests that a “normal game” would therefore be a game without “uncommon identities”. He also later attributed this decision by the developers as a PR strategy rather than a design choice. The implied designation of ‘normality’ is revealing of unconscious bias.

I’m limited to players in Portugal. [...] so, if I’m getting a new player, he’s gonna be of an inferior level because I already had the best 5. [...] Now think about a community that’s even smaller, that’s the community of girls who play. (P11)

P11 here used the logic that ‘it is already so difficult for men, let alone for women’ as justification for why women’s teams would be unsuccessful. It follows that women’s teams as a DEI initiative would be unproductive because... who would want to be in an unsuccessful team? P11 also makes a comparison between the Portuguese player pool and the Portuguese women’s player pool, which is necessarily smaller than the former. But P11 presumes that the 6th best player in Portugal could never be a woman. This focus on how small the pool of players is as a justification for the lack of DEI also links to theme 2 below.

Subtheme 1.1: Own DEI solutions

There was consensus that mixed teams should be the ideal model in esports competitions. This was contrasted with women-only leagues, which were generally accepted with some caveats.

“To separate completely would be bad; having space to get as much attention as the other teams [...] To create a space or a different league or different communities, tournaments, where everyone can meet in friendly tournaments” (P1). In this segment, even though P1 considered gender segregation a negative thing, they suggested the creation of a separate ‘Path to Pro’⁷ for marginalised genders justifying this with the added media attention that a separate league would involve. “There should be three options: one just for guys, one just for girls, and one mixed [...] because in the end that all helps [esports] to grow. I think that would probably be the best solution” (P10). In this second segment, P10 also talks about different paths for different groups of people, with the justification that the more activity there is, the bigger the industry becomes. In sum, a safe space, visibility, and media attention to be as equal as possible was a common answer.

⁷ Path to Pro is the name of Activision Blizzard’s programme for aspiring professional players to participate in tournaments of increasing performance level.

P6 had a different take on the concept of mixed teams. He recalled a situation he reportedly has seen “happen a thousand times”. When a woman joins an existing men’s team,

...three months into the team – and it’s even going well – but there’s a guy who wants to be her boyfriend. And then there’s another guy who also wants to be her boyfriend. And these two guys are going to destroy the team because they’re fighting over a girl who may not even be interested in them. You know? It creates a lot of problematic dynamics. (P6)

The above quote by P6 provides insight into how men in the Portuguese esports community might resist the idea of having women in the same team as them. This view of women as the object of desire in a team lends support to a heteronormative view of masculinity.

P11 mentioned his organisation wants to tackle the gender diversity imbalance by creating a team and following them, documentary-style, registering their professional progress:

We take five girls, [...] train them, follow them around as a documentary, you know, following their evolution for a year [...] take them to bootcamps. [...] [Film them] while they’re practicing, make content with them, those funny Q&A videos, and yeah, that’s a project. (P11)

Although the enthusiasm for the principle was clear, the opportunities for audience growth and content creation was very present too. As this project seemed too ambitious for now, P11 mentioned his organisation has focused on recruiting more women to the roster of gaming influencers and streamers as a way to balance the gender gap. When mentioning social media influencers, P11 reinforced that his organisation is only interested in *real* women who play games, as opposed to those who resort to sexually titillating content by livestreaming in Twitch’s non-gaming related categories. This discourse resonates the literature stating women in esports are limited to performing femininity in an undistracting amount, as this is essential for them to blend in male-dominated sport (Taylor, 2012).

The sort of strategy to improve women’s visibility was also mentioned by P5 who declared being made to feel like the *token* woman. Both her then-boss and a national TV esports channel would often request her for media appearances:

him wanting to take a selfie with me... just to post it on social media to show off ‘here’s our only girl in the team’; ... I know sometimes they used me a bit as a token... even [Portuguese TV channel] also wanted to do an interview with the OW players from the organisation and they said to our faces that they wanted me to do it because I was the only girl, so I don’t think it’s a bad thing. (P5)

The above quote is a first-person perspective of a Portuguese then-professional player. Being the only woman in the team, P5 noticed that the media attention she got may have been due to her gender, and due to being the only one presenting as a woman in the team. There is some conformity in the discourse, accepting the status quo, but also a recognition that promoting the women that are already present in the industry may be a good strategy to inspire others. This led the researcher to ask P5 whether she felt the burden of representing her gender. P5 replied recognizing that there is something beyond meritocracy when it comes to women in esports:

I never felt a burden, for me it was pride... of doing well, of showing that I'm here and I deserve to be here. It was like... I'm a girl and I'm not here just because I know person A or B, I'm [here] because I played, and I practiced, and I did everything the same as the others or even more, sometimes... because I think that as women, we have to further prove we deserve it more than others. (P5)

The above quote by P5 starts by denying the feeling of tokenism as a burden. Instead, P5 said she felt proud of showing off her talent and her choice of being a professional player. She also invoked merit as the reason for her success instead of nepotism – which is a recurring theme discussed below. Further, P5's response also echoes what others have said in relation to the additional hurdles women face when working in male-dominated spaces.

Another suggestion to improve an existing DEI initiative came from P8 after being shown the visual elicitation tool.⁸ P8 suggested that instead of harassment awareness campaigns showing how women are often victims of bullying in online games:

If they swapped this for an ad for example with girls playing [...] and winning [...] it would be much more successful. Because this here is very much victimhood in the sense that 'if I play I'm gonna feel bad'. (P8)

The segment above suggest that esports or videogames related campaigns should focus on the positive: rewards (winning, being part of a team), as well as representation and inclusion; rather than the negative (women being victims) and punishing (men becoming aware of women gamers' realities). An example of this would be the Portuguese Football Federation campaign⁹ for their esports division which included

⁸ A visual elicitation tool was used during some interviews where harassment towards women was already being discussed. The video shared was the Sky campaign 'No Room for Abuse' https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fC0yzzCWKG4&t=2s&ab_channel=Sky

⁹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TNwkMvl_v_E&ab_channel=Federa%C3%A7%C3%A3oPortuguesaDeFutebol

a professional female eFootball¹⁰ (Konami, 2021) player who is a national bi-champion.

However, in P8's discourse there is also a note of cynicism for women's claims regarding online harassments. Perhaps as a man and as a streamer it makes P8 feel uncomfortable to see men portrayed as the perpetrators of such behaviour. P8, later in the interview noted that “the way women hear those comments, men will hear others... I get flamed every day.” Nonetheless, the point to P8's initial quote is taking a positive approach to inclusion and representation rather than making players aware of the negatives of online gaming. It is a positive approach and one that game studies scholars have been trying to introduce in the development of frameworks to tackle toxicity and improve prosocial behaviour (Assunção et al., 2023).

2. Portugal is too small to care (about DEI)

No one cares in a good way; that is, if you want to play, play. [...] there was never an instance where a girl wasn't allowed to play. So, I think in a good way, no one cares about it, and let's play. That's it, no matter who you are. (P8)

In the segment above, P8's comments rendered the diversity issue invisible by framing it as a non-issue. The community does not recognise it as an issue and thus, the position is that there is nothing to resolve or to fix. It adopts the positive spin which esports enthusiasts often use to portray the industry as progressive and accessible to everyone, as opposed to traditional sports (Witkowski, 2018).

“The main organisations in Portuguese esports have no intentions of developing feminine esports in Portugal, they really don't! [...] If they already know it is so difficult to make it for the guys...” (P11). In P11's perspective, the justification for a lack of investment in women's esports and DEI in Portugal is the knowledge and status quo regarding the national scene. As it is still in development, women's esports are not seen as a potentially profitable endeavour. ‘Difficulty’ is used by P11 as a way to code the strenuousness of trying to succeed in Portuguese esports.

We could give that spin that Portugal is a homophobic or racist country... I think that everybody lives in their own little bubble and people just don't care enough. [...] if it's not a problem that concerns you directly, the majority of people don't care about those topics [...] it's like the problem of homelessness. (P6)

¹⁰ eFootball (Konami, 2021) is a football simulation videogame previously known as Pro Evolution Soccer.

In the segment above, P6 adopted an individualistic lens to explain the lack of interest in social issues such as absence of diversity, and compares this to homelessness. At the same time, P6 defended Portugal from potential criticism of this study, for seeming homophobic or racist by resisting DEI initiatives.

Subtheme 2.1: #MeToo

The researcher was aware of a #metoo accusation within the Portuguese OW community before recruiting both parties to the study, although she was not completely sure of who the accused party was. After the interviews, she realised they are both prominent figures in the community: one was a founder of the Portuguese OW community and is currently a professional in Portuguese esports, and the other was one of the best female Portuguese esports players during her active years; so their perspectives were essential to collect.

I didn't want to talk with this person. But at a professional level, for my career, and to follow a goal that I have which was to play OW in this team... I know I have to talk to him. I have to push my trauma aside (Participant X).

This participant's perspective demonstrated that even though there was a traumatic experience being relived through the 'imposed' contact with this person, the participant's desire to succeed in esports superseded the pain of remembering said experience.

I'm a step away, so close to following my goal to be the first girl, and on top of that, to be part of the [tournament name] and I felt that I was so close to that dream but at the same time... to get there, it meant traveling and being with these people with whom I did not feel comfortable (Participant X).

The quote above shows how much Participant X was determined not only to be successful in esports but also to be a trailblazer in terms of gender diversity in esports. However, when faced with the need to travel with the rest of the team, self-preservation superseded this desire.

3. Nepotism

Nepotism as discrimination in the OWPT community was a recurring theme. One consequence of this favouritism was that:

You either were friends with some of the right people or you couldn't really do anything. No one took you seriously. Some teams wouldn't even

scrim¹¹ with us... they just never took us seriously because we were 'that team'. (P2)

Here, P2 refers to a separate grassroots esports organisation. This separate organisation was ridiculed in the community because it welcomed players of almost any rank to be part of their teams. According to P2, this was seen by some people as diluting the esports and misrepresenting the Portuguese community. Incidentally, this alternative organisation had multiple women players.

The following segments refer to the OW World Cup (herein OWWC) committee, which was composed of mainly founders and administrators of the OWPT. Together, this group organised trials for Portuguese players to play in and try to be selected to represent the country in Blizzard's OWWC.

They [Portuguese OWWC committee] had already chosen the top players based on who they were; [...] They were only chosen because they were famous names in Portuguese OW. (P5)

The team that went to the OWWC was decided on the basis of who is friends with those people, not by their skill [...] and what happens is [...] we don't take the best team... we take the team who talks to the right people. (P2)

In the quotes above both P5 and P2 present the perspective that the national rosters are selected with bias. The *famous names* were all male players who had previously participated in the OWWC and/or had been professional OW players. P2 and P5's perspectives seem to indicate that nepotism is used to maintain the status quo marginalised folks from accessing esports spaces and events. While it could also be said that the most skilled players were selected based on their OWWC and professional experience.

"More of non-Portuguese speaking people than actual Portuguese... [a guy came out of nowhere] it was found that he was half Portuguese and so he came in" (P4). P4 and one particular non-Portuguese speaker player were the last two people who could be selected from the trial phase. Only a small difference in game 'skill rating' separated them. When probed¹² about whether she thought it was discrimination due to her gender, P4 said "I think so. I don't see any other reason. Other than the high peak [in skill rating]." Said difference in both players' skill rating was marginal

¹¹ Scrimmage: Practice games.

¹² The researcher was cautious not to lead the participant into admitting that she felt discriminated due to her gender. In fact, the researcher only probed this topic because the participant had used the word 'prejudice' earlier in this question, indicating some level of discriminated feelings.

and thus could easily be construed as an excuse to choose a male player over a female one. A relevant insight here is that P4 employs nationalism to construe herself as more worthy and deserving of being part of the team, because she spoke Portuguese fluently whereas the other player did not.

“With all the problems I’d already had being the only girl in the team... I didn’t know everyone that well like they knew each other” (P5). In this quote, P5 alluded to having felt gender discriminated before and that having conditioned her experience in the community, which had the consequence of her not advocating for her spot in the World Cup team. Besides nepotism, P5’s perspective points towards gender discrimination.

4. Self-preservation

Given that online communication is often fraught with animosity among its habitués, the interviewees inevitably discussed how they manage toxic behaviour in online gaming spaces. Known self-preservation techniques used by women-identifying people were among the mostly cited. These were: refraining from using voice-based communication in games, blocking or muting other users, or “having thick skin” (P1). When faced with gender-based discrimination, many prefer to stay silent and let their skill in the game speak for them:

I would shut up. At least with Portuguese folks I’d just shut up. [...] What am I gonna do? I can’t change their minds [...] we literally did some 1v1s¹³ on OWPT and I would win the 1v1s [...] it was never enough to show them.
(P4)

This quote from P4 echoes some of the findings in literature (Assunção, 2016) about women in esports and other male dominated areas. No matter how much a woman demonstrates they have merit to be at a high rank, they are still targeted based on their skill. It also demonstrates a level of conformity with the status quo, instead of resisting, P4 preferred to remain silent. When P4 was asked why she mentioned the use of this strategy specifically with other Portuguese players, P4 explained:

Any wrong moves or something and you become a meme in the community. With other folks [...] because I don’t know them, I can simply fight back the stupid things they say because I don’t want them to roll over me or the women who play the game in general. (Personal Correspondence)

¹³ Meaning one-versus-one matches. In online gaming spaces they are associated with online ‘beefs’, where one person challenges another to settle a dispute regarding their skill at the game.

P4's response denotes a fear of being humiliated by the Portuguese community. I.e. “becoming a meme” means becoming a joke in the community where something someone said or done in the context of an online match or otherwise is repeated jokingly among others. Whereas the anonymity granted by playing with people outside the Portuguese community, gives P4 the courage to stand up for her values and defend herself.

Blocking, stop interacting, or even [...] simply leaving the game [...] or muting [...] and I know there's a huge debate around that and I understand both sides [...]: if someone is mistreating you, why don't you mute them? But [...] I want to win, I want to contribute, I can't mute someone if it's a team game. (P1)

In the segment above P1 mentions some of the strategies they have had to use at distressing times during OW matches. They also mention the disadvantage some of those strategies put players in. OW, as a team-based game, requires players to communicate. And if revealing one's gender through voice creates animosity in the team, it is a potentially excluding tool.

5. Ubiquity of online toxicity

Lastly, the ubiquity of toxic behaviour was a frequent theme to come up. Besides the type of toxicity directed at women-presenting folk discussed in various themes above, it was also discussed in relation to its role within esports teams and other spaces.

“When the cameras are not *on* every player in every league say something that [...] there's no one, no one, who could avoid being that honest. Everyone there says something that could be like, socially cancellable.” P6's quote gives some insight into the normalisation and perhaps even encouragement to say inappropriate things in esports spaces. However, the player notes that in the higher echelons of professional play, such as the OWL or the Contenders leagues where players are often filmed and their communications recorded, this behaviour is subdued. This is consistent with literature showing that toxicity is not as rife in higher levels of esports play (Leiman & Herner, 2019; Sacco, 2016; Türkay et al., 2020). Nonetheless, P6 links said behaviour to ‘social cancellation’, a term relative to cancel culture, “‘cancelling’ is an expression of agency, a choice to withdraw one's attention from someone or something whose values, (in)action, or speech are so offensive, one no longer wishes to grace them with their presence, time, and money” (D. Clark 2020, p.88). This means P6 believes that toxicity is so ubiquitous that nothing could change that, especially because it is overt. Moreover, he attributes honesty to these “socially cancellable” things that are spoken by professional players, which ignores peer pressure effect and in-group behaviour as well as creating practices and languages that reinforce the exclusionary nature of esports.

“I had people coming into the stream and criticising me saying “eh you’re bad at it” or something, and I got a bit conditioned by it” (P11). The quote by P11, currently a team manager, reflects upon his experience as a player who sometimes streamed his gameplay. The negative comments he got were related to his gameplay skill which is also consistent with literature findings that men-presenting streamers get comments about skill rather than appearance (Nakandala et al., 2016). What is revealing here is that P11 admits that his performance got impacted by those comments. In a similar vein, P10 also mentioned this conditioning due to pressure to perform by fans of a team he had been playing for, before becoming a team coach.

Discussion

The findings in this paper reveal that DEI in Portugal is seen as much more than a numbers game. Future DEI in Portugal should not merely focus on increasing the presence of women and marginalized genders in the esports industry but should strive for fundamental change in how all individuals can become professional gamers, embracing acculturation and communities of practice. In Portugal, professional gaming is intricately connected to casual gaming; it is not a separate sphere. Those who become professionals were once casual players who collectively constructed the gaming culture, created the memes, and challenged companies to improve. By nurturing communities of practice and promoting acculturation, the industry can create inclusive spaces where diverse individuals naturally progress from casual to professional gaming without being singled out based on gender expression.

It seems that Portuguese players see games companies as the “all-powerful Other” confirming esports as an “institutionalised game” such as other traditional sports (Summerley, 2020). Just like traditional sports governing bodies establish rules, manage competitions, and promote sports’ development, game publishers impose values, narratives, and practices on the players which they have to contend with, and many times resist – perhaps out of spite for the lack of control over those narratives and value-laden practices.

The data shows that DEI initiatives face significant challenges within the Portuguese community due to its small size and limited economic resources.

Even though evidence exists that more equal societies become more wealthy (IMF, 2020), Portugal seems resistant to this. Hofstede’s cultural dimensions model (Hofstede Insights, 2024; Minkov & Kaasa, 2022) is useful here to explain this resistance. Hofstede’s cultural dimensions model is a framework for explaining cultural differences and their impact on behaviour in various contexts. Portugal’s main cultural dimension is uncertainty avoidance which means relying on proven methods and sticking to one’s beliefs, leading to intolerance of “unorthodox behaviour and ideas” (Hofstede Insights, 2024). This would explain resistance to change and desire to

maintain traditional and conservative practices inherited by the videogame culture at large and by traditional sports frameworks that negate women's participation.

The Portuguese esports community, though passionate, is relatively small and economically modest. This limits the number of organizations, tournaments, and prize pools available, making it overwhelmingly difficult to allocate resources for DEI initiatives without the certainty this will be valuable.

Therefore, while the Portuguese community's underdog character adds to its charm and resilience, it also poses substantial challenges to the successful implementation of DEI initiatives, requiring tailored strategies to overcome these obstacles.

Most DEI mentioned were resisted rather than championed. Alternative solutions were often proposed or idealised, provided with the caveat that the future should be inclusive of mixed teams. The implications of these are multifaceted: gender exclusive spaces are seen as a safe environment and as an opportunity for media attention, an overall positive for esports as it means more events and thus more opportunities for advertising revenue. On the other hand, the gender divide perpetuates the fallacy of skill difference as justification.

Participants' perspectives focused on how existing DEI feel artificial, imposed, and thus unproductive or even counterproductive. This finding parallels the views of games workers in Canada who seem sceptical of DEI, pointing to loopholes in policies and how big studios can afford to hire the few skilled women available, leaving the many indie studios to seem unwilling to hire them (Perks & Whitson, 2022). Perspectives from those with some power in the community, however, tended to render the diversity issue invisible, to lament the lack of resources (to cement DEI), and to the echo the meritocracy myth (Paul, 2018).

Nepotism emerged in the data as an explanation for two things. 1) A reason why DEI is resisted in Portugal - friends of friends are benefitted rather than being open to new (marginalised) individuals; and 2) a reason why the scene has not evolved, as it is badly managed, and the wrong people are given opportunities. This theme evidences the fallacies of meritocracy as the same participants who previously were defending it, here prove that it is fallible. This finding provides an argument for fair and transparent try outs with performance indicators. The lack of transparency and lack of data availability might actually be causing a false perception of nepotism because the process of selection is just too opaque for the rest of the community.

Self-preservation was mentioned in relation to players identifying as women and how they reacted to negative communication online, mostly gender-based harassment and critique. This theme supported previous research, reverberating the comments of many other players who resort to hiding their gender identity to attempt a fairer appreciation of their skill at the game, rather than the prejudice that often comes with hearing a female voice during an online match - even before seeing one actually play. It also revealed that in such a small community such as the Portuguese

who play OW competitively, even though gender is portrayed as 'invisible', women cannot have a voice of protest, lest they be tagged as an outsider. That is, since the community is so small, women are welcomed as "part of the gang" so long as they do not bring up issues related to their gender and "play by the rules" of the (male) majority.

Relatedly, fatalism was present across many themes, but especially in relation to online harassment or toxicity. This feeling came through testimonies of the lack of openness to change, in relation to the community in general, to the country and its peoples, which linked to scepticism as to where esports in Portugal will go, or whether a scene exists at all.

Limitations and future work

Being part of a larger project that aims to triangulate this data with additional work, this study is necessarily smaller in scale. The details unveiled in its analysis may not be representative of the whole Portuguese esports community.

Further research should aim to find the representativeness of these findings, casting a wider net over the Portuguese esports community. It is essential to understand why it seems most Portuguese esports fans see DEI as unproductive and artificially implemented. This will aid future work to develop esports equitably in the country, and potentially other countries with similar outlooks on DEI.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study reveals significant tensions between the expected DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) initiatives and the experiences of the Portuguese esports community. The imposition of DEI efforts, often seen as top-down and externally driven, clashes with the local community's perceptions and needs. Participants viewed many DEI initiatives as artificial, lacking genuine integration within the cultural and structural realities of Portuguese esports. The small size of the community and limited economic resources further complicate these efforts, with many feeling that DEI is not a pressing concern compared to other industry challenges.

While the global esports industry increasingly prioritises diversity, equity, and inclusion, the Portuguese community remains sceptical, seeing these initiatives as either unproductive or counterproductive. This misalignment between international expectations and local attitudes results in resistance rather than the adoption of DEI goals, highlighting the need for culturally adapted strategies. Participants proposed alternative solutions, such as mixed-gender teams, but maintained concerns about the real value of DEI in their context. Future efforts must focus on bridging this gap,

ensuring that DEI initiatives are not merely enforced but genuinely resonate with and address the specific needs of the community.

Acknowledgements

The study was funded by Falmouth Doctoral Consortium Studentship. The authors would like to acknowledge the help of JT, IL, MP, FC, and RJ, for their support and comments; and the Portuguese Overwatch Discord community for allowing participant recruitment.

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Appendix 1

1. What age are you?
 - a. Whats your main occupation right now? Job/studying? Esports?
 - b. Whats the gender you identify as? And your pronouns?
 - c. In what country do you live? And your nationality?
 - d. Are you married/single/living with partner?

[*overwatch*]

2. What made you start playing *overwatch*?

- a. Whats your relationship with OW now?
3. What made you want to start playing at competitive level/in teams?
4. Did you ever livestream your OW play? Why/why not?

[esports]

1. What is your role in esports?
 - a. How does your role impact your life?
 - b. Is it important to keep up with whats happening in the OW esports scene?
 - i. Anything specific to Portugal?
 - c. What sort of challenges did or do you have in improving and furthering your career?
 - i. If you left esports, would you like to go back?
 - d. Would you like esports to be your main work?
2. Are you in an esports org? why? Whats the advantage?
 - a. How did you start, did you have to apply/try out?
 - b. What challenges did you encounter?
 - c. How did you feel supported?
3. What importance do role models have?
4. Is esports a viable career?
5. Esports in Portugal?
6. Do you consider gaming equivalent to sports?
7. What do you think about gender segregation in esports?

[diversity]

1. What do you think about EDI in esports?
 - a. Eg. Overwatch Calling all heroes tournament

- b. Overwatch diverse characters
 - c. [Sky & Guild esports campaign – video elicitation tool]
 - d. Do you think these DEI work?
2. What have you seen being done like this (DEI) in Portugal?
 3. How diverse are the organisations you are/have been in?