Egale

What 2SLGBTQI Youth in Esports Want:

Navigating Cyber Violence and Modes of Gaming Otherwise

September 2021

Acknowledgements

Egale is Canada's leading organization for 2SLGBTQI people and issues. We improve and save lives through research, education, awareness, and by advocating for human rights and equality in Canada and around the world. Our work helps create societies and systems that reflect the universal truth that all persons are equal and none is other.

Our Mission

Egale works to improve the lives of 2SLGBTQI people in Canada and to enhance the global response to 2SLGBTQI issues. Egale achieves this by informing public policy, inspiring cultural change, and promoting human rights and inclusion through research, education, awareness, and legal advocacy.

Our Vision

Egale's vision is a Canada, and ultimately a world, without homophobia, biphobia, transphobia and all other forms of oppression so that every person can achieve their full potential, free from hatred and bias.

With Support From

Cite As

Dela Cruz, A. (2021). What 2SLGBTQI Youth in Esports Want: Navigating Cyber Violence and Modes of Gaming Otherwise. Toronto, ON: Egale Canada.

Contents

Executive Summary

With generous financial support from the Ontario Trillium Foundation Seed Grant Program, Egale Canada conducted foundational research to better understand the experiences of young 2SLGBTQI gamers living in Ontario. The objectives of this research were to better understand the state of online hate and cyber violence including homophobia, biphobia and transphobia faced by Ontario esports participants, identify what youth are doing to support one another and themselves while gaming, as well as identify how the esports industry can better care *for* and *about* their 2SLGBTQI players.

Using a community-based participatory research approach and a desire-based framework, we completed a literature review, four virtual focus groups (each with 4-8 2SLGBTQI youth gamers living in Ontario), as well as a Knowledge Sharing Day, with participants ranging in age from 16 to 30 years old. Once transcribed, focus group and Knowledge Sharing Day data were analyzed using a thematic analysis to pull out key themes and findings. What follows are some of the key findings from this research:

1. **Esports as a liberatory space**

   One strong theme that emerged from this project was the need to think about esports spaces as both a site of cyber violence and a site of liberation for 2SLGBTQI gamers in Ontario. Participants engaged in esports for a multitude of reasons, including but not limited to engaging in competition without physical aggression, finding community, and developing their gaming skills. Most participants turned to gaming as an escape from the stresses of everyday life and some used esports to explore their gender and sexuality in ways they felt they could not offline.

2. **Intersectional approaches to cyber violence in esports**

   All participants experienced and witnessed many forms and types of cyber violence on a regular basis. This was especially true for women, femme, Black, Indigenous, People of Colour, and 2SLGBTQI players who experienced a variety of slurs as well as misogynistic, homophobic, and transphobic ideologies in chats and during participation in voice communications. Overall, these different forms (e.g., slurs, ideologies, etc.) and types (e.g., ableism, misogyny, racism, etc.) of cyber violence

negatively impacted the emotional wellbeings of our participants, fostered environments in which our participants feared being targeted or <u>doxxed</u>, and often caused them to leave certain gaming spaces.

3. **Lack of support from the esports industry**

Despite the existence of safety mechanisms like reporting systems, research participants felt that they still lacked support from the esports industry. In particular, the lack of support that our participants felt from reporting and moderation services as well as the lack of authentic representation negatively impacted their gaming experiences. Without accountability, participants indicated that the lack of support from the industry would continue to be another form of cyber violence.

4. **2SLGBTQI youth want more support from the esports industry**

Though young 2SLGBTQI gamers in Ontario lack support from the esports industry, this is something that they express a desire for. Better queer representation behind and in front of the camera, improved reporting systems, as well as more accountability and responsibility from the esports industry are actions that participants felt would benefit their experiences online and allow the esports industry to demonstrate that they value their 2SLGBTQI players.

5. **Queer kinship and care between 2SLGBTQI youth**

Young 2SLGBTQI participants shared ways in which they showed support and care for one another in various ways online. They advocated for other players, mentored and protected new players, created and maintained transnational friendships, and built community and fostered queer kinship online.

6. **2SLGBTQI youth gaming tactics**

Research participants employed several tactics to feel safer while gaming. Leaving the game, selecting chat filters, playing by themselves or with close friends, and finding more inclusive spaces are some of the ways research participants navigated the esports world. Some participants also "played into the negativity" for comic relief and enjoyment.

In this report, Egale also offers individualized recommendations to the following groups:

1. Educators
2. Esports Industry Members and Gaming Developers
3. Gamers
4. Moderators
5. Streamers and Other Influential Gamers

Lastly, a note that this research study took place in Ontario, but that findings can be moderately transferable to other provinces and territories in Canada.

Glossary

2SLGBTQI: Two Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Questioning, and Intersex.

BIPOC: Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour.

Chat: Space in games and on platforms for players to communicate with one another.

Discord: An application used to communicate with friends and other gaming communities, has text and voice channels for players to engage with one another.

Dogging: The act of continually attacking someone online.

Doxxing: Non-consensual distribution of personal information through cyberspace. This form of violence is often used to threaten and attack women, 2SLGBTQI people, and racialized people (Ruberg et al., 2019).

Esports: Electronic sports, commonly referred to as esports, are formal video gaming competitions most often played in order to win championship titles or cash prizes. These competitions are usually played by individuals on separate sponsored teams at tournaments mostly hosted by leagues or game publishers. For the context of this project and to reflect the knowledge shared by our participants, we include non-competitive games and casual gaming within the category of "esports" (see Background and Literature Review section).

Esports Industry: All members involved in tournaments, game development and publishing, branding, sponsorships, advertising, broadcasting, moderating, and investing, as well as teams, leagues, platforms, fans, journalists, and audience members.

Fake Gamer Girl: Term used to describe girls who "only want a date and can't really play" (Jenson & de Castell, 2018, p. 735).

Femme: A complex descriptor of an identity term used by those in the 2SLGBTQI community to describe their unique relationships to femininity.

First-Person Shooter (FPS): Genre of video games where players shoot guns and fight with other weapons from a first-person perspective (i.e., you experience the video game from the eyes of your character).

Flaming: Ridiculing, insulting, or "roasting" someone online, usually involves the use of slurs and profanity.

Game Developers (Game Devs): Members of the gaming industry who are responsible in all stages of video game development including character creation, animation, storyline development, etc.

Incel: Self-described "involuntary celibate" men who claim they are unable to find sexual or romantic partners despite their efforts and desires. Their deeply misogynistic, transmisogynistic, and misogynoir ideologies, beliefs, and actions on and offline result in violently harming and killing women.

Lobby: Space where players gather before and after the end of gaming sessions to talk, change settings, etc.

Mad: A politicized identity that may be commonly recognized by its relations to mental illness; people who have experienced sanism.

Masc: Masculine; a word to describe a behaviour, trait, or style of expression that has cultural associations with 'being a man'. These associations change over time, between cultures, and from person to person.

Mic: Microphone, used to communicate in voice communications.

Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA): Genre of video games where two teams compete to protect their territory and destroy the opposite team's territory on a battlefield.

Party: Collection of players who queue together, usually are a group of friends.

Pre-T: Pre-testosterone; before starting hormone replacement therapy with testosterone.

Queue: Searching for a match in a multiplayer online game. Usually players "queue" up with a group of friends, however, players can do this alone (referred to as a "solo queue").

Real-Time Strategy (RTS): Genre of video games that are not turn-based, where players use strategy to achieve a particular goal while other play simultaneously.

Reporting: When harmful or toxic behaviour occurs in games, chats, servers, or on voice communications, players can submit a report regarding these harmful players to the games or platforms. Often, this is the only way harmful players can face consequences for their actions.

Server: Separate spaces on Discord for different groups of people to engage. Each server usually houses a group of friends, a particular gaming community, a fanbase, etc.

Steam: Application used to distribute, purchase, download, and access games and gaming communities.

Stream: A live stream; a live recording of someone on a streaming service usually playing video games.

Swatting: A person online calling the SWAT team or police to inform them of a false crime in order to instigate a house raid. This is often committed by gamers who want to witness the house raid through the other person's stream.

Third-Person Shooter (TPS): Genre of video games where players shoot guns and fight with other weapons from a third-person perspective (i.e., you can see your player onscreen while gaming).

Trolling: Type of cyberbullying that purposefully instigates and antagonizes people online. Trolls, users that engage in this behaviour, often have a desired or predicted outcome that is met through these provocations (Thacker & Griffiths, 2012).

Twitch: Application used to watch live streams of other gamers and where gamers can stream their own content.

Voice Communications (Voice Comms): Audio/voice channel for players to talk with one another.

Introduction to the Study

Since their emergence, video games have provided youth from all around the world with outlets for stress and creative expression as well as opportunities for community building and storytelling. Though it is currently estimated that 97% of youth are gaming (Lobel et al., 2017), the esports world is well-known amongst youth for its toxic and negative gaming culture (Bell, 2019; Hoffman et al., 2020; Hokka, 2020; McKinnon, 2018; Romano, 2019; Sacco, 2020). Some of the ongoing issues that occur in this gaming community include outright misogyny towards women and femme gamers, incel and terrorist violence, racism, homophobia, and transphobia (Dela Cruz, 2021). Though these instances illustrate the ways in which 2SLGBTQI youth experience disproportionate amounts of cyber violence in online spaces, very few gaming research studies have examined the impacts of cyber violence on young Canadian 2SLGBTQI gamers.

In order to attend to this gap, Egale Canada (Egale), with funding support from the Ontario Trillium Foundation's Seed Grant program, began a research project in 2020 that centred on the experiences of 2SLGBTQI youth gamers in Ontario. When this research project was originally proposed, Egale had two objectives:

1. To better understand the state of online hate and cyber violence including homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia faced by 2SLGBTQI youth gamers in Ontario.

2. Identify possible interventions and strategies to develop the emotional and social skills of 2SLGBTQI youth with regards to resilience and management of online hate.

Using a community-based participatory approach, virtual focus groups and a virtual Knowledge Sharing Day were held to allow 2SLGBTQI youth who engage in gaming and esports to (a) engage in meaningful conversations about their collective experiences in gaming and esports spaces, and 2) outline their own desires and needs as participants in online gaming. In this document,

when we refer to participants, we are referring to a subsection of 2SLGBTQI Ontario youth who participated willingly in the research study. We thank them for their participation and for sharing their experiences with us.

In these conversations, we found that the question of resilience required further critical analysis. As Zandashé Brown (2021) noted,

> I dream of never being called resilient again in my life. I'm exhausted by strength. I want support. I want softness. I want ease. I want to be amongst kin. Not patted on the back for how well I take a hit. Or for how many.

In line with this critique, this project did not seek to congratulate 2SLGBTQI youth on how many hits they can take nor how well they can take it. Instead, we reoriented our frame of analysis and asked instead: How do 2SLGBTQI youth support one another and themselves while gaming? How can the esports industry better care *for* and *about* 2SLGBTQI players?

Background and Literature Review

Note: As part of this research, Egale conducted a literature review of existing gaming scholarship as well as esports policies and procedures that was used to inform the focus group questions in collaboration with an Ad-Hoc Youth in Esports Research Advisory Committee. The literature review in its entirety can be found here.

Electronic sports, otherwise known as esports, are formal video gaming competitions that typically involve winning cash prizes and earning championship titles. The types of video games that are played at esports competitions are primarily competitive ones. These include first-person shooter (FPS) games like Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (CS:GO), real-time strategy (RTS) games like Starcraft 2, and multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) games such as League of Legends (LoL), among other genres and games. However, these games are not reserved for competitions only. In fact, non-professional, casual, and professional esports players alike all play these games daily on gaming consoles, computers, and mobile devices. Platforms like Discord, Steam, and Twitch allow players to watch others play, stream their own gaming, access gaming libraries, try out new games, and play with others. Many everyday gamers also consider non-competitive games like Animal Crossing, Grand Theft Auto (GTA), and Stardew Valley as esports.

To reflect this broader understanding of esports, we expanded our definition to also consider these games and platforms. In doing so, we sought to better encapsulate the kinds of games and spaces that both professional and casual esports players engage with. We defined esports as both formal video game competitions as well as casual multiplayer gaming online. In broadening the scope of the term esports, we also wanted to expand our definition of the esports industry to include positions like gaming developers, moderators, and platform authorities, who are responsible for overseeing casual and everyday gaming.

In academic literature, most cyber violence research studies considered cyber bullying to be the primary mode of harmful online behaviour. However, in esports, cyber violence has many more meanings. Other harmful targeting that esports players have faced include trolling and doxxing, which have caused harm to BIPOC, women, femme, 2SLGBTQI, mad, deaf, and disabled gamers. Another mode of cyber violence that has impacted these players is hate speech. Violently ableist, racist, and sexist slurs, the uptake of discriminatory language by gamers (such as the incel lexicon), and trash talk exchanged between players can often go unnoticed by moderators who are meant to keep esports spaces safe. Unfortunately, misogynistic, transphobic, and homophobic discourses run rampant in esports. For example, women and femme gamers have experienced harassment for being "fake gamer girls" and have been objectified and sexualized. Additionally, video game content has built on these misogynistic ideologies by illustrating women as sexual objects who are worthy of harm (Dela Cruz, 2021; Fox & Tang, 2017). When reported for these behaviours, players can work their way around bans and other consequences by making new accounts and engaging in more harmful behaviour such as swatting. Because of these mappings of cyber violence, we did not want to frame the term "cyber violence" as solely related to cyber bullying. Instead, we were informed by how cyber violence functions as a nuanced web of constantly overlapping, interacting, and informing modes of violence that occur in a variety of spaces simultaneously.

Professional esports competitions are often guided by rules and codes of conduct that prohibit discriminatory speech between players with competition officials and referees in place to enforce these rules. Platforms that are used for daily gaming such as Twitch and Discord also house a set of Community Guidelines to further protect their players by banning these same behaviours. Platforms like Twitch also contain a community of volunteer moderators to

ensure that [chat](link) spaces and voice channels are abiding by the rules set by the streamer and the platform. While these mechanisms are in place, gamers all over the world still experience cyber violence regularly. On a federal level, regulation has been difficult because of the fleeting and transnational scale and scope of these virtual interactions.

In doing this research, we recognized the many meanings and locations of cyber violence and looked at its impacts across a variety of spaces. Additionally, we considered the effectiveness of guidelines across a variety of platforms and sought to understand how these guidelines affected the everyday gaming of 2SLGBTQI youth living in Ontario. By looking at the ways that cyber violence continued to manifest itself across the broader gaming sphere despite reporting and banning systems, we found it crucial to ask what the term "safety" really meant for 2SLGBTQI youth who engage in gaming and esports. One important question guiding this research project was: Do these safety measures protect and value the lives of 2SLGBTQI youth?

Additionally, this study builds on the work of Halberstam (2005) and other scholars who query who is constituted as "youth." Most 2SLGBTQI folks experience youth outside of the normalized ages 16–29, as systemic inequities and social barriers like coming out often do not allow 2SLGBTQI people to experience youth until much later (Furlong, 2015; Halberstam, 2005). In using the term "youth," it is also very important to consider what the term implies. Often, the term "youth" is used to victimize, de-humanize, and subjugate youth and their autonomies (Dyer, 2017; 2019). This research project valued youth as autonomous knowledge holders and expanded the definition of youth to include any participant that still identified with this term, regardless of age.

This research also troubled the term "community," particularly as it relates to the 2SLGBTQI community. Often, this term creates a monolith of the 2SLGBTQI community and does not recognize the differences that exist between Two Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, questioning, and intersex people. By troubling these terms, this research sought to move past their assumed meanings. Instead, we sought to engage with these terms in messy and nuanced ways. When working with the acronym 2SLGBTQI, we wanted to contend with the other intersecting and overlapping issues that BIPOC, fat, poor, mad, deaf, and disabled 2SLGBTQI people must deal with in addition to the differences that exist between members of 2SLGBTQI communities.

Methodology

In approaching this research project, the research team was driven by the intention that this work should be entirely 2SLGBTQI youth led. As such, we chose a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach for our research. CBPR values an ethical engagement with community including involvement in the creation of research questions, input in research mobilization, and continued engagement in all areas of the project. In using CBPR, we recognized young 2SLGBTQI gamers as knowledge holders, subject matter experts, and valuable research collaborators. This approach allowed us to foster ongoing community engagement throughout the course of the project and allowed 2SLGBTQI youth participants to provide input to provide input and direction in all areas of the project. To involve 2SLGBTQI youth as research participants and contributors, we sent out a call for 2SLGBTQI youth to sit on an Ad-Hoc Youth in Esports Research Advisory Board. As such, 2SLGBTQI youth were involved in every aspect of the research project from design to implementation, to analysis, and evaluation. This methodological approach allowed us to build relationships and community, generate meaningful connections and conversations, and open a space for everyone involved to continue discussing how and where to move forward with this research.

Our interpretive approach to this research was also deeply informed by the generative work of Eve Tuck, particularly her concept of "damage-centred research." Tuck (2009) states,

> In damaged-centered research, one of the major activities is to document pain or loss in an individual, community, or tribe. Though connected to deficit models—frameworks that emphasize what a particular student, family, or community is lacking to explain underachievement or failure— damage-centered research is distinct in being more socially and historically situated. It looks to historical exploitation, domination, and colonization to explain contemporary brokenness, such as poverty, poor health, and low literacy. Common sense tells us this is a good thing, but the danger in damage-centered research is that it is a pathologizing approach in which the oppression singularly defines a community (p. 413).

Because this research project centred on the impacts of cyber violence on 2SLGBTQI youth, we did not want to present 2SLGBTQI youth participants as "broken" or document them as victims of harm. By reorienting our research

approach to a desire-based research framework, we instead wanted to understand the nuances of young 2SLGBTQI life in the gaming world and allow 2SLGBTQI youth to self-determine and outline their needs as everyday esports players.

This research project consisted of two phases: 1) focus groups and 2) a Knowledge Sharing Day event. The overall objective of this research project was to better understand the experiences of cyber violence that 2SLGBTQI youth gamers have when gaming online as well as determine the ways that the esports industry can better care *for* and *about* 2SLGBTQI youth. More details of these phases can be found in Appendix A - Methodology Continued.

Key Findings

1. Esports as a liberatory space

In line with Eve Tuck's call for desire-based research approaches, this research sought to better understand the nuanced and complex experiences that 2SLGBTQI youth experience while gaming. Though this research examined the impacts of cyber violence on 2SLGBTQI youth living in Ontario, the youth from the focus groups and Knowledge Sharing Day saw esports as both a space of negativity and toxicity as well as a space of liberation.

Although most of the focus group participants had been playing video games since childhood, many began playing esports recently. Most of the youth who started esports recently joined in their early college and university years as a result of more exposure through friends and esports clubs. When asked how gaming makes them feel, all the participants described esports as liberating:

> *"[It makes me feel] very exhilarated. I get a huge rush after it."*

> *"Being able to just like win and let out all of that tense feeling I had, was very cathartic."*

The reasons why 2SLGBTQI youth participants chose to engage in gaming were capacious and multitudinous. Some of the reasons mentioned during the focus groups include:

- **Competition**: Having a space to tap into their competitive side that is not physically aggressive in the same way as traditional sports.

- **Cooperation**: Having the opportunity to play with friends and others from all around the world.

- **Feeling less judged than physical sports**: Participants note that they were often judged for their bodies and skills in traditional sports, so esports allowed them to play with others in a less judgemental environment.

- **Finding community**: Finding people with similar interests and feeling a sense of collective belonging.

- **Personal and skill development**: Having the opportunity to constantly better themselves at their craft.

- **Storytelling**: Video games provided some of the participants with new and creative stories to follow along with.

- **Strategy and problem solving**: Having the opportunity to engage with their problem-solving skills and challenge themselves intellectually.

Escape was one of the main reasons that participants in the focus groups and Knowledge Sharing Day enjoyed and returned to gaming. Esports allowed the participants to step away from the stresses of everyday life and participate in an online world where they felt a sense of belonging and felt like they could be themselves:

> *"Gaming's been my escape. So, anytime I'm having a hard time, I distract myself and I put myself somewhere that I feel like I belong, and I excel."*

> *"I'm like a whole different person [when gaming]. So, it's an escape."*

2SLGBTQI youth participants turned to esports to deal with and distract themselves from offline stresses. Participants noted that these stresses include school, work, and family, as well as systemic issues like racism, misogyny, and homophobia. Participants felt that they could escape these stresses and instead turn to a more supportive community online. For the 2SLGBTQI youth who participated in this study, being a "different person" online provided them with new possibilities and avenues for navigating their own embodiment and autonomy. On multiple occasions, the participants indicated that gaming helped them to navigate, explore, and engage with their sexuality and romantic feelings. For trans, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary players specifically, games were also spaces in which they could explore new and different gender expressions and identities:

> *"I find games very validating for my sexuality and romantic feelings... For me, on the internet and gaming... dating Sims, dating stories, I was into all of that. And that was very freeing because it's ridiculous sexual content but it's fun and silly... [I was able to engage with] sexuality in a playful way."*

> *"For me the escapism started [when]... I used to go [online]and pretend I was a boy on Club Penguin. I had penguin girlfriends and all that stuff. And I feel like now that I'm older and more masculine, my GTA character online is super feminine. She has on a corset and everything like that, just something that I completely wouldn't wear. I mean, who knows, maybe in my lifetime I'll want to be femme again and all but it's just awesome being somebody that doesn't have to worry about real life stuff."*

> *"I'm a brand-new person on GTA... It was really fun, like I have masks on. I'm a girl in GTA, so I'm going to shop, I'm trying to be a baddie [laughs]. It makes me feel good!... Making the characters, trying on the new clothes, and going around and being this new person who I could probably never be in real life, and actually exploring femme identity virtually is really fun."*

Character choices and relationships in video games allowed 2SLGBTQI youth participants to play with gender and sexuality in safe and fluid ways. The participants expressed that they were able to explore their gender as well as their platonic and romantic relationships in ways that they could not or did not want to do outside of esports. As the second quote demonstrates, systemic issues like racism, homophobia, misogyny, and femmephobia can prohibit 2SLGBTQI youth from exploring their gender expression outside of esports. Esports provided the 2SLGBTQI youth who participated in this research with a space to be playful, malleable, and comfortable about their gender expression and sexuality. Participants also felt gender euphoric when other players perceived and treated them as their online personas.

2. Intersectional approaches to cyber violence in esports

Although participants used esports spaces to find community and escape everyday life, each and everyone had witnessed or experienced cyber violence while gaming. For many participants, this was something they experienced daily:

"I really like the social aspect and I like being to randomly queue with 5 other people I don't even know and talk to them for 40 minutes... That's so much fun and also it sucks that whenever that happens, there's like a 4 out of 5 chance that at least one of them is going to harass me in some form or another."

All participants expressed that moments of cyber violence were most likely to occur when they were starting a game they had never played before, as players were often called out for being unfamiliar with the controls, lacking communication skills, and not knowing how to play as a member of a team:

"When I'm playing a game and I have my mic on, I can get targeted for sounding gay. People will start being really rude and saying homophobic stuff especially if I'm not doing well. If I'm doing well, then people tend to not mind or not worry about it so much, but if you're having an off day or if I'm new to the game, then that's when people tend to target me more and that turns me off to those kinds of games."

The most common form of cyber violence that participants experienced was the use of slurs. Because multiplayer games rely on constant communication, this was experienced mostly through voice communications (voice comms) and in chats. Though all the youth had either received or witnessed someone else use the f- or t-slur (slurs that are used to target the 2SLGBTQI community), young 2SLGBTQI gamers in Ontario were also called many other slurs related to several different oppressed and repressed identities:

"I've noticed if [other gamers] have a mic, some of them might say racial slurs, homophobic stuff, or their username will be making fun of a certain kind of thing. There could be bad people online."

"I think... especially if you're solo queuing with other strangers, sometimes it's 14-year-old boys calling you the r-slur and it's disappointing because, is this the people that we're raising?"

"I was in this Discord once... Nobody knew anything about my status as a trans man... Eventually, someone in the group... went and had such a fun time telling everybody that I was the t-slur of the group, it was relentless... That's kind of what you have to deal with as a trans gamer... I wish it wasn't like that, but it kind of is."

"If you play a really crappy round, sometimes people will message you and be like, 'Hey, you suck' or, 'Hey, you were a bad teammate' and if you scroll, there's so many f-slurs and r-slurs, it's just terrible. And it's not even as if they're in the heat of the moment, they're going out of their way to choose to go after someone and it's terrible."

While 2SLGBTQI youth participants turned to esports to escape the stresses of everyday life, they were also subject to homophobic, transphobic, racist, ableist, fatphobic, and misogynistic slurs and content as part of their everyday gaming. Though some participants continued to use esports as a liberatory and playful space where they felt they could shed their labels and be treated just like any other player, for many women and femme gamers as well as other trans, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming players, esports functioned as the complete opposite. As one of the participants stated:

"I do agree that sometimes there is a way that it doesn't matter who you are [because] some people don't care about your gender, but a lot of the time I experience the exact opposite."

Non-cis men participants noted that in addition to all the other slurs that they received, they also had to contend with ideologies of sexism, transphobia, and transmisogyny, which run rampant in the gaming world, especially over voice comms. Unfortunately, these issues included being harassed and hypersexualized about their bodies and voices:

"Fetishization attention! Sometimes people will be awful to gamer girls."

"Because [a feminine presenting streamer] had such a feminine sounding voice, they got harassed. I find that the popular esports games are very rooted in misogynist ideals and values and it's really hard for female-presenting people or queer people to get into them because of how rooted in homophobia and sexism it is. I feel like if we try to change [these misogynist ideologies] within popular esports games that would help, but it's going to be really tough because it's hard to change one's ideology when playing games in a male-dominated [industry]."

"...I'll be in a Call of Duty lobby and I might be having a bad game, everybody's talking down on me. As soon as I go, 'Sorry, guys! I'm having a bad game!' they go, 'Oh, what the fuck? You're not who you should be!' They start making fun of me, 'Oh, you're transgender. You're bad at games.' They make fun of me for no reason. And then I get into a lobby with them later on and they sh*t down their throats! They don't say anything after that! But initially, it hurts. It feels bad and it's kind of hard to carry on playing some days."

When asked what they did to avoid these instances, trans, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary participants overwhelmingly suggested that they would avoid games with voice comms altogether or participate less in voice comms out of fear of being doxxed, hurt, or outed:

> *"I also stray away from games that use mics where you're talking to other people. It was a lot worse for me a while ago pre-T."*

Sadly, these cyber violences were not only used to target 2SLGBTQI players by non-2SLGBTQI gamers, but they occurred from within the 2SLGBTQI community as well:

> *"Just the other day I queued with these people who were all in a party together, it was 4 queer people, and I was like, 'This is awesome! These are my type of people!' And then I went into a party with them, and they started body shaming one of the agents on Valorant! And I'm like, 'You're supposed to be my kind of people! Disappointing!'"*

When looking at these quotes cumulatively, it is clear that the 2SLGBTQI youth participants did not only experience cyber violence in respect to homophobia, transphobia, and biphobia. In fact, different 2SLGBTQI youth experienced esports differently. 2SLGBTQI gamers cannot be treated as a monolith. Without considering the differences between 2SLGBTQI youth, esports research cannot account for the differences in power that occur within and around this community. As Lorde said, "There is no thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives" (1984, p. 138). As one participant put it:

> *"Seeing tweets like, 'Oh, this generation this wouldn't last a second in a COD lobby,' are probably right! I wouldn't because I don't want to be called slurs and I don't want to be yelled at by a white man, to be honest. I'm scared, I'm really just scared because I don't know what I'm going to get myself into. Being a triple minority kind of sucks, right? Everybody has something to say about you."*

BIPOC, femme, fat, and disabled 2SLGBTQI players were all uniquely impacted by cyber violence in esports in ways that straight, white, cis men gamers were not. In this way, BIPOC, femme, fat, and disabled 2SLGBTQI participants were disproportionately impacted by these different forms and types of cyber violence. As such, the harm that 2SLGBTQI youth experienced in esports cannot be bracketed from issues of class, race, gender, ability, etc.

Overall, these different forms (i.e., slurs, ideologies, etc.) and types (i.e., ableism, misogyny, racism, etc.) of cyber violence negatively impacted the emotional wellbeings of participants, fostered environments in which the participants feared being targeted or doxxed, and often caused them to leave certain gaming spaces. Doxxing is a particularly dangerous situation for trans, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary youth to experience, as this can result in their personal information, including their experience and identity as queer and trans people, being distributed widely without their consent.

3. Lack of support from the esports industry

In the focus groups and at the Knowledge Sharing Day, 2SLGBTQI youth gamers in Ontario expressed that these negative experiences were not limited to interactions that happened between players. When asked what they would do when toxic situations occurred, most of the participants indicated that they would turn to the esports industry for help. One of the primary ways that participants sought support from the esports industry was through reporting systems. The focus groups and Knowledge Sharing Day clearly showcased that 2SLGBTQI youth in Ontario are doing their part to try and keep the online space safe by reporting incidences of violence that happen to them as well as to others in the game. However, 2SLGBTQI youth gamers in Ontario were critical of the accountability that they receive during the reporting process:

> *"I don't think report does anything because it's kind of like TikTok and Instagram and stuff, reports giving them a warning."*

> *"If it's... a violently homophobic username, it's probably going to impact me a lot more than if it's just a milder comment. It's a lot easier to shake that off. But if it's something more serious, like maybe someone's got a hold of like my personal information and they're like confronting me about it in a game, I-I really don't honestly feel like especially in those moments where there's someone I can turn to because aside from just like blocking the person and hoping they don't make a new account to come after you again. There's not really any big gaming overlords that you can go to for help. It's just reporting it, but I mostly feel that I just kind of have to fend for myself."*

Though participants turned to reporting—the only available resource to support them in situations of cyber violence—the reporting process did little to rectify the incidences of harm that participants faced. Though reporting is meant to keep esports spaces safe, all four focus group conversations mentioned that the

lack of accountability that players experience from the esports industry does very little to protect gamers. Instead of receiving any feedback, updates on any reports made, or support, participants claimed that they were often left without answers and remained in the same spaces and with the same people they were harmed by.

Because most games rely on chats and voice comms to communicate, some participants used chat filters or muted other gamers to see and hear less discriminatory interactions during their gaming. However, this did set back some players from participating in esports fully. As two participants noted,

> "If you mute everyone and then you don't get callouts, it's actually detracting from your fun. It's like, I have to have less fun for the sake of protecting myself? That doesn't make sense."

> "Chat filters are great, but the problem with some games is that they rely so heavily on voice comms... You'll be playing and then suddenly one teammate just starts flaming you and yelling at you, 'Fake gamer girl,' whatever. The problem is people are like, 'Mute and move on,' so you mute them but now you've lost callouts from half of your teammates, and you don't know where they are, you don't know what's happening. So as much as 'mute and move on' is a great thing, when I'm playing Valorant, I don't want to lose my communication. When I mute, I'm putting myself at a disadvantage just for being a girl."

As demonstrated by these quotes, chat filters and muting participants who are exhibiting harmful behaviour often hindered the experiences and participation of 2SLGBTQI youth gamers in Ontario. Despite the existence of chat filters and muting options which the industry puts in place to protect its players, participants still felt that they had to sacrifice their enjoyment and ability to play as a team member in order to avoid cyber violence and make their gaming spaces safer.

In order to attend to this gap, many esports platforms have moderation systems available for gamers. Volunteer moderators as well as automated moderators can filter through comments in the chat and over voice comms to ensure that players are not breaking rules or communicating any offensive content. For example, Twitch has a moderation tool called AutoMod that allows players to determine what kind of content they want to filter and to what degree they want to filter that information. When talking about moderation, participants were highly critical of both people moderators as well as automated ones:

> *"[AutoMod is] almost like a sliding scale of 'how much racism and homophobia do you want in what you are watching or sharing' which I thought was ridiculous... Ultimately you still need a person there to maintain nothing's getting through that people don't want to hear."*

> *"Even the real people moderators are not faultless, they're not good too. The person [moderating] could be flawed so it's kind of hard to find the right kind of streams and games that are good, it's like trial and error. Unfortunately, you might have to see a lot of harassing content before you actually find a stream that you like. Maybe that's why people don't get involved so much, or that could be a reason why they're not playing games.*

Though moderators are meant to help keep esports safe, participants revealed that both people moderators and other moderators can let hurtful comments slip through the cracks and into the gaming space. Participants also noted that moderators were often responsible for setting the tone of the space. In this way, moderation had a significant impact on the feelings and gameplay of 2SLGBTQI gamers.

In addition to reporting and moderation as a source of harm, many of the participants openly critiqued the content of video games, particularly the limited character options made available by gaming developers in most games. Focus group participants suggested that video games often present two options to players: machismo, masculine men and hypersexualized, feminine women. Most of the youth heavily critiqued this, highlighting that hypersexual character choices not only perpetuated monolithic gender norms, but also limited the representation of a range of people. As one participant stated,

> *"For me, as someone who is actually much more on the nonbinary spectrum, I find that I don't have a lot of connections to the characters I play. And for that reason, when I was playing World of Warcraft, and I was playing a female character because I felt that kind of more suited who I wanted to represent, I just got harassed all the time. I didn't like doing that, so I moved back to a masc character. And then that at least allowed me to blend in and not be harassed as much but then, I found I never really connected with characters in games."*

The lack of support that participants felt from reporting services, moderation, and the lack of authentic representation not only negatively impacted their gaming experiences but are all forms of cyber violence. Because of this, cyber violence was not something that only occured between players, but something that was also instigated by the esports industry and other relevant institutions.

Though "safety mechanisms" are in place, discussions amongst research participants clearly indicated that without proper accountability, the mechanisms meant to protect gamers did not truly keep them safe.

4. 2SLGBTQI youth want more support from the esports industry

Though 2SLGBTQI youth participants noted a lack support from the esports industry, participants expressed that support from the industry is something that they desired. One of the main issues that participants brought forward concerned 2SLGBTQI representation in esports. Not only did participants indicate that there was a lack of women, BIPOC, disabled, and 2SLGBTQI people in front of the screen (as characters, pro players, endorsed streamers, and in advertisements), but they also felt that there was little to no diverse representation behind the camera (as decision-makers, game developers, and other esports industry members). Many of the focus group and Knowledge Sharing Day participants also felt that current 2SLGBTQI representation in esports was extremely performative:

> *"[The esports industry should do] those kinds of diverse campaigns without attaching it to a month. Add advertising with Black gamers outside of Black History Month, advertise them in their regular ad season. [Have] a gender nonconforming gamer without making a big deal about it. Don't necessarily say, 'Because of Pride month, look at this game,' just have them there and not make a big deal out of it. [The esports industry should not] do it performatively because they feel like they have to. They should do it because of the genuine want to have a more diverse community for their game. I'm tired of seeing the gaming studios changing their logo to a rainbow for a month and then changing it back. Just incorporate a whole range of people all throughout the year not just because it's the 'socially required month to do some LGBT advocacy.' It's just something that should be done all the time, not just every once in a while."*

One participant stated that representation should be threefold: those who play the games, in-game content, and those who are involved in making the games. Participants felt that representation would feel more authentic and meaningful if the esports industry would engage in more intentional representation across these three areas and outside of designated months like Black History Month or Pride Month.

Another key issue that participants unanimously agreed upon during the focus groups as well as the Knowledge Sharing Day was reporting. All participants felt that reporting was one of the only ways that they could deal with harmful

situations. Though all participants actively reported other players that were interfering with their fun, safety, and participation, they felt that their efforts were not taken seriously and were, in the end, unhelpful:

> *"If someone is in a party with me and they call me slurs and sh*t on me and do whatever and then I report them and write up a little mini essay and include quotes, I don't even know if Valorant even bans them!"*

> *"It really feels like a lot of these games don't take [reporting] seriously. It's hard to actually get people banned and even if you do, it's super temporary. I wish that the people in charge of these games would actually look into what they're saying and remove their account or something because it's just so ineffective."*

The participants stated that they often received no response from the games or platforms about the status of their reports. In addition, they noted that it was difficult to get other players banned and that their reports rarely ended up with the other player facing consequences for their actions. One of the key words that came up during both the focus groups and the Knowledge Sharing Day was the term "accountability." Participants proposed ways that they felt the esports industry could improve its reporting systems:

> *"Make a positive experience, actually take action, ban and remove harassers, make it easier for users to report bad behaviour."*

> *"I think that some sort of a feedback system where they're like, 'Hey! Sorry you had this experience; we banned this player. Thumbs up' [would be helpful]"*

> *"If other players could see players being banned for toxicity, it would make it more likely for them to not be toxic."*

> *"I'm trying to make a contrast between the accountability that these games hold for people being toxic in their community. [I know one streamer who goes in to] see what their offense was, were they being racist, were they asked to stop, have they been reported before, have they been banned before, and he'll take a look at all of that and ask did they apologize, were any steps taken, did they still try to weasel around the ban, were they still actively being toxic after the mods stopped them, and I think the accountability is something that would be really nice to have [from the gaming industry]. For the [industry] to actually bother because you just make another account, it's so easy to get around it; there needs to be actual accountability.*

Game devs and people that moderate the community need to be going out of their way to stop the toxicity because it's just too easy to get around what's put in place right now."

The last quote above goes into very meticulous detail about the expectations of some of the participants. Participants desired action, responsibility, and accountability from the esports industry. Overall, research participants indicated that they want to see more efforts from the esports industry that let them know that their reports are heard.

One participant expressed that for reporting to improve, the esports industry needs to invest more meaningfully in online safety:

"When I read a lot about online spaces and safety, the main reasoning [behind why esports companies don't ban people] is because it's not profitable to ban people. A game fundamentally wants more gamers and wants people playing their game and if there's a lot of people behaving badly, it costs money to put resources into moderators to investigate them, give feedback, ban them for a short time, let them have a trial period. It takes money for the staff to make a safe community online. Secondly, they are literally losing customers. Capitalism's evil, we all know this, but [all these companies outline their] commitment to online safety... Whether it's on Twitter, it's a video game, it's an online forum, it's a website, [these companies] have Terms of Service, [they] do have rules. So, if you claim to not be racist, that means you're going to ban racist talk, then you have to put the money and operations behind it, and that's not profitable. You literally have to pay and put work into making an online space safe, that's what I would tell a video game company or an esports company: you have to walk the talk which means losing money, in a way. You could say losing money short-term for a long-term safe space where people are not being harassed every day. But the company doesn't care about that, they care about money."

For the esports industry to invest more meaningfully in online safety, participants indicated that these industry members must compensate people to take the time and effort to look at their requests seriously. Though this seems like a large investment, participants pointed out that their participation was worth protecting:

*"The behaviours of the people they support, like streamers, when streamers are sh*theads on stream, Riot can see that!... I know that Riot can see that because I can see that! Everybody can see that! To have your brand ambassadors sh*t on people and be misogynistic and hold all of these values that the devs want to get out of the game and then you don't ban them because they're bringing you income – it's a conflict of capitalism and just being a good person."*

"I think it's really unfortunate that we have to pander to these big corporations with financial desires, but I think it's also important that they recognize that showing allyship can actually be profitable for them long-term because like we were talking about with escapism and marginalized groups of people needing that a lot, I think video games are a great way to do that."

What these two participants gestured towards was the idea that the wellbeing of 2SLGBTQI gamers matter and are worth investing in. By putting money and effort towards keeping 2SLGBTQI players safe in the long-term, more 2SLGBTQI players would feel comfortable playing esports. Having authentic 2SLGBTQI representation and ensuring that these players feel safe in lobbies, parties, chats, and on voice comms could lead to an increase in players overall.

Participants expressed that putting more effort towards accountability would do more than keep online spaces safe. In the focus groups, participants discussed the fact that gaming toxicity has material and tangible impacts both online and offline. Research participants brought up the presence of incels and alt-right gamers online and the ways that they have impacted the lives of gamers outside of esports:

"Gaming companies need to acknowledge that [when they let] their white boy demographic do horrible things online and harass people [without consequences], they are literally the Nazi pipeline, they are literally the incel pipeline to Nazi pipeline... This online violence is real violence. A company has to acknowledge that if you're hosting online space and hosting violence, you are literally creating a space for people to submit certain ideas [where some people have gone] out and murder[ed] people... They need to acknowledge that they are hosting violence and there is real-world violence from that. It's hard for them to acknowledge, but they have to acknowledge it. It is a literal necessity if you care about people's lives."

As this participant stated, online violence can and has led to real-world violence. This real-world violence is known to target women as well as BIPOC, and 2SLGBTQI gamers (Romano, 2019; Quinn, 2017; West, 2014). For there to be accountability and true online safety in esports, 2SLGBTQI gamers in Ontario argued that the esports industry must recognize and take accountability for the high stakes that cyber violence in their space can cause.

Thinking about queer representation, reporting, and accountability together, there were two large questions that emerged:

1. Who are esports for?

2. Who does the esports industry care about?

An overwhelming topic that participants brought up during the focus groups was the question of value. They felt unsure about whether the esports industry valued 2SLGBTQI players because of the lack of support and solidarity they felt from the industry:

> *"I feel like if I were to talk to the bigger names of esports, those bigger names when you think of competitive video games, I would ask them what kind of people they want in their community. What do they actually value when people are participating in their like community? So, say in games like Call of Duty (those multiplayer shooters), how are you including everyone into the participation, the chat, the community? Because as I've seen, with [some groups of] people, it's not that inclusive. So, I challenge them to think of how their community is now and how they can change it so that everyone is participating in esports, so it's not like certain people but everyone, you know?"*

> *"I think it would help to make it very, very clear on social media and everything [esports companies release] that they support [women, BIPOC, queer folks] to send the message to these gross bigots that we don't want you here. We don't support you and we don't support this list of things."*

At both research events, 2SLGBTQI youth indicated that they do not need more rules. Participants have been following the rules and guidelines put in place by the esports industry, they have been reporting instances of harm they experience and witness, yet they still experienced harm. As research participants pointed out, the responsibility of online safety needs to be shifted from the players to the industry. The industry needs to be accountable to its players, who are supporting each other and are eager to play in a safe, fun, and interactive environment.

5. Queer kinship and care between 2SLGBTQI youth

Despite experiences of cyber violence, most of the youth who participated in the focus groups and Knowledge Sharing Day highlighted that they are actively creating space to support and care for one another. Participants shared experiences of queer kinship and care for one another in several ways. Most

participants claimed that standing up for other players was a regular part of their gameplay. In fact, participants were more likely to stand up for other players rather than advocate for themselves:

> *"In both real life and in online spaces, I do not care if it's like racism, ableism, transphobia, homophobia, I don't want to hear it."*

> *"I don't really engage if people come at me, but if it's somebody else, I'm all on it... I'm not really one to go for somebody unless they go at somebody that I love, like a friend or someone like that."*

> *"If I'm in a queue and there are 4 other people and they're all masculine sounding voices and they're all ganging up on me, I'm not going to talk back, I'm just going to be sad, and it's going to ruin my game and it's probably going to ruin my night and it's going to suck... If I'm queuing with someone and I want to protect them... I will flame them... I don't argue for me and I don't argue for the person I'm arguing with, I argue for any third parties who may be in the call or in the team in the party."*

> *"I actually was playing Rainbow Six Siege a few days ago and it was, like, 4 in the morning so there was barely on in our region. Had the same 2 kids that were like 14 or 15 in 5 games in a row, and they were just hurling slurs at me every game. But, the entire lobby stood up for me. It was like 8 people reporting them as much as they could every game. It was a good feeling that they were helping but, it's hard."*

> *"That's so cool that there were people in the lobby actually sticking up for you. I haven't had that experience yet... I hope to."*

These examples of activism are ways in which 2SLGBTQI youth support each other in an otherwise potentially harmful digital context. Unfortunately, as the last quote above shows, it is not something that all participants have experienced.

As aforementioned, these kinds of support networks were especially needed when gamers were trying out a new game for the first time, as they are often bombarded with negativity for their lack of practice and skill. Many 2SLGBTQI gamers recognized this lack of compassion for new players as a major issue and refused to let other players experience what they had to go through. To resolve this, some of the youth mentored and protected new players. As one participant expressed,

> *"I love the new players, I love when I can tell someone's new in a game, especially if they're a kid. If they're a kid and their mic's on, I will play 50 games with them in a row to make sure that no one is going to be dogging on them, to make sure that they're having fun. When I was playing Fortnite, this was like an everyday occurrence. I'd get a kid and they'll be like, 'I don't know what I'm doing' and I'm like, 'You know what? It's OK, here, let me help you, [redacted], we'll keep playing until you feel comfortable' ... So, I think helping people get better is a positive experience as well as knowing that I'm preventing them from any negative experiences. Like, if I know that me being on this person's friends list gives them a reason to hop back on this game, I'm definitely going to play with them every time they invite me."*

These moments of mentorship and role modelling are ways that participants look out for, support, and care for one another. Instead of remaining in what can be an aggressive virtual space, participants created vulnerable, compassionate, and thoughtful spaces for one another that were equally as competitive and fun as other esports spaces. These moments of mentorship and protection were also ways that participants created and upkept transnational friendships:

> *"You can make long-lasting friendships from [playing with people around the world]. Like, I have a friend and he's in Texas. Even though that's not super far from Canada, it's still like, I've never met this guy, but we play games every single day. Every single day we play video games with each other."*

> *"It turned into more of a way to have friends that I wouldn't be separated from because ... we had moved maybe 20-25 times. So, it was hard to have friends and keep them and be able to hang out with them a lot. Finding online friends was definitely a lot easier and I could meet people that had the same interests."*

> *"... Meeting Black people online is so fun... It's magical meeting Black people anywhere and you guys get along, but meeting someone that is also Black online, and you guys are getting along is magical as well. I just live in a racist world, that's just it. We live in a misogynistic world, that's it. And I take that as what it is just because that's my life, but the online space when it comes on to other aspects of exploring [my expression and meeting other people] ... I always take that more than just taking all the other bullcr*p."*

Similar to moments of mentorship, building community virtually and fostering relationships online were significant, generative, and meaningful engagements for participants. As the last quote above notes and as previously mentioned, participants are dealing with systemic violences like racism and misogyny

both online and offline. These queer kinships opened space for another kind of world, an otherwise world, that exists alongside and despite systemic violence. This experience of kinship allowed participants to create worlds where they are cared for and about.

6. 2SLGBTQI youth gaming tactics

Often, toxic gaming culture is written off as a given condition of being present online. In fact, this was a sentiment that was reflected by some of the focus group participants:

> *"There's only so many places you can try to go to, different <u>servers</u>, different groups, different Discord calls. Eventually, you just have to find a place and settle in it. It's almost like having thicker skin. Even though you don't want to, ultimately, it's really hard to have that group of people that you can rely on constantly to be there... You just move on. It's part of the game, you go into a game expecting that."*

However, many of the youth engaged in strategies that did not require them to "suck it up." In addition to supporting and caring for one another, participants employed several tactics that facilitated their full participation in esports. Participants overwhelmingly agreed that the tactic that they utilize most often is simply leaving when faced with a toxic gaming space:

> *"I ended up having to leave because if I didn't, I was going to probably continuously get hate-crimed and not be welcome in there anyways. It was that kind of thing. Like, I didn't want to leave it... It's complicated."*

> *"Yeah, [staying in a toxic gaming environment] also just doesn't feel worth it for me. If I'm taking the time to try and do something I enjoy and someone's taking away from that or making you feel like you're not welcome in that space, then I'm going to leave."*

While leaving a game may deter from their ability to engage with other gamers and participate in esports fully, the youth who participated in this research indicated that they valued their own worth, energy, and capacity, and often stepped away from toxic gaming environments to preserve their mental and emotional wellbeing. In this way, participants were constantly asserting themselves and their agency by making decisions to leave harmful spaces. Even though our participants' feelings about leaving were complicated (as they often felt that they were sacrificing their fun and their full participation), it was a tactic they used for their own survivance.

In addition to leaving harmful and toxic gaming spaces, most of the youth who participated in this research often searched for better and more inclusive gaming spaces and communities. These include only gaming with friends, choosing not to play multiplayer games, playing non-competitive games like Stardew Valley and Animal Crossing as well as watching and engaging with diverse streamers such as Black Girl Gamers, an all-Black women Twitch channel, and Galorants, a women-only Valorant Discord server. By engaging with these different spaces, the participants felt that they were able to participate more fully, freely, and safely. Moreover, participants noted that watching BIPOC and women streamers allowed them to see the diverse representation that they desired. For participants that explored their gender and identity through character choices and customizations, engaging with specific games like third person shooters allowed them to witness their virtual embodiments. As one of our participants stated,

> *"What I tend to actually like to play even more is third person shooters because I get to actually see all the movements, all the ways I'm going about things, and it makes me feel more immersed in the game when I do so."*

By playing third person shooter games like Grand Theft Auto, the youth who participated in this study were literally able to *see* their characters more. In these games, they could watch themselves walk around, try on new clothes, and talk with other characters. As the quote above mentions, participants felt that this choice allowed them to feel not only as if they could embody their character more, but also feel validated in their gender expression and presentation both online and offline.

Though participants previously critiqued chat filters as heavily flawed and unable to catch all toxic behaviour and speech, many of them still chose to utilize chat filters for their own safety. By using filters, participants attempted to see less harmful behaviour and game without engaging with the toxicity:

> *"I find that some games, it's not many yet, but all the ones that offer chat filters, I love to turn those on because I know that people are going to say stuff and I don't want to see it, I don't want to have to deal with it. I know people are going to do it and I shouldn't have to see that."*

In contrast, many of the participants engaged in what one participant referred to as "playing into the negativity." In toxic situations, these research participants would turn these negative interactions on their head:

> *"I actually kind of like the banter. It's like, 'What are you going to say next? Give me what you have!'... I guess I have the personality to fight everyone online and sometimes you really have to come with that energy."*

> *"If I have my mic on in the game and I'm being called a dumb B-word or getting told to get back in the kitchen, it really makes me laugh and I'm like, 'Oh my gosh! Of course! How do you want your sandwich? Like, do you want hot sauce? Do you want this? You want that?' Then they're like, 'Oh, shut up!'... So, it really is like I play into the negative experiences because then they don't know what to do. If I react in a negative way, they're going to feed off of that, but if I respond to them in a joking way or agree with them, then they're losing their marbles and they're just like, 'I have no idea what to do here. I want to inflict pain on this person and they're laughing at me.' That's how I deal with negative experiences in gaming spaces."*

The latter quote demonstrates how this participant was able to reclaim their agency and power when faced with a misogynistic player. By "playing into the negativity" through engaging in heated trash talk and jokingly agreeing with misogynistic gamers to startle them, participants were able to turn toxic situations into something comical and enjoyable.

Recommendations

What follows are sets of recommendations for various audiences that were determined by research participants during the focus groups as well as at our Knowledge Sharing Day event. For specific rules and guideline changes that our participants proposed, please refer to the following section entitled, Next Steps.

Recommendations for Educators

1. Educate students on how to be respectful to other players online and report harmful behaviour online.

2. Highlight diverse games, gaming communities, and streamers to students.

3. Include systemic violences (e.g., ableism, racism, sexism, etc.) in addition to the different forms and types of cyber violence in your curriculum, that way students can recognize harmful behaviour when they experience and/or witness it.

4. Provide students with emotional, physical, and material support and resources regarding cyber violence.

5. Recognize that there is not only one kind of cyber violence and educate students about the different forms and types of cyber violence that exist.

Recommendations for Esports Industry Members and Game Developers

1. Be intentional with your representation, show you support the 2SLGBTQI community all year round, not just during Pride month.

2. BIPOC and 2SLGBTQI gamers are currently taking on the labour of protecting themselves others without support from formal systems. Develop and create safety mechanisms that remove the responsibility of safety from individual players.

3. Create and promote more 2SLGBTQI-only or 2SLGBTQI-majority spaces (i.e., Discord servers for specific games, competition spaces, etc.)

4. Don't just "talk the talk," you must also "walk the walk." Words of support are needed but not enough, ensure that your actions and monetary investments reflect your words.

5. Endorse, highlight, and sponsor diverse streamers (i.e., women of colour, older gamers, 2SLGBTQI players, etc.) without engaging in tokenism.

6. Ensure that not only white men are making high-level decisions in the gaming world. Let women, BIPOC, disabled, and 2SLGBTQI community members have a seat at the table.

7. Hire women, BIPOC, disabled, and 2SLGBTQI people both in front of the camera (as players, broadcasters, etc.) as well as behind (as developers, animators, etc.)

8. Hire more trained human moderators to make spaces safer for 2SLGBTQI and other marginalized gamers.

9. Invest not in consequences for harmful players, but in preventative measures that keep harmful players out of gaming spaces.

10. Provide a statement of support for 2SLGBTQI community and other marginalized groups and show your solidarity whenever possible.

11. Significantly improve reporting systems so that they keep players safe (i.e., players often make new accounts after their previous ones are banned).

Recommendations for Gamers

1. Continue to report anyone that is toxic or negative towards yourself or others.

2. Continue to stand up and advocate for your fellow players if you feel safe enough to do so.

3. Help new players when you can, especially if they're starting a new game. This can look like taking the time to practice with them and teaching them any tips or tricks you've picked up.

4. Reflect upon any harmful ideologies you or your friends may hold (such as anti-Blackness, misogyny, transphobia, etc.) and work on shifting them.

5. Remind other gamers, especially your friends, to change their harmful language both online and offline.

6. Share knowledge and tactics of how to protect yourself online: when to fight back, when to quit, what options exist to stay safe, etc.

7. Uplift and support diverse players and streamers as well as games with diverse characters.

Recommendations for Moderators

1. Provide a statement of support for 2SLGBTQI community and other marginalized groups and show your solidarity whenever possible.

2. Read up on anti-oppressive resources and continue learning so you can recognize offensive or hurtful comments when they occur.

3. Remember that care is at the centre of your work; if someone says that they are hurt from a comment, believe them.

4. Remember that online violence can turn into real-life violence. Ensure that ableism, classism, homophobia, misogyny, racism, and transphobia have no place in the spaces you are moderating.

5. Take the time and effort to be accountable to players in your space. For example, read through each comment, determine if that person has a history of being toxic, etc.

Recommendations for Streamers and Other Influential Gamers

1. Endorse, highlight, and sponsor diverse streamers (i.e., women of colour, older gamers, 2SLGBTQI players, etc.) without engaging in tokenism.

2. Hold other popular streamers and pro-players accountable, as many are responsible for fostering toxic behaviour and harmful communities.

3. Provide a statement of support for 2SLGBTQI community and other marginalized groups and show your solidarity whenever possible.

4. Read up on anti-oppressive resources and continue learning so you can recognize offensive or hurtful comments when they occur.

5. Take responsibility for what happens in the space you are hosting and be accountable to everyone that engages with your space and content. Though this may risk losing some of your following, it is worth protecting marginalized players.

Next Steps

Though this research project examined the esports experiences of a subset of 2SLGBTQI Ontario youth gamers, esports research would benefit from looking closer at the impacts of esports and cyber violence on women, femme, fat, BIPOC, and disabled gamers within the 2SLGBTQI community across Canada. This research would be able to attend to the different ways that different 2SLGBTQI players experience esports.

For esports industry members, next steps include starting to make changes that reflect the needs of 2SLGBTQI gamers. In addition to the recommendations provided by the participants, some proposed ideas from the focus groups and Knowledge Sharing Day include:

1. Compensate or reward players for reporting harassment. This would galvanize more players to call out harmful behaviour.

2. Develop a rating system for players to determine who they decide to queue up with. For example, players can leave a rating for fellow players so that other know which ones are great to play with as well as ones who have exhibited some offensive behaviour.

3. Disable friendly fire (not just from guns) so people are not able to target 2SLGBTQI and femme gamers.

4. Ensure that reported players are unable to use chat or voice functions and ban them from using extra functions immediately at the time of report until a human can review it and take action.

5. Let reporters know about the status of their report (i.e., confirm when the report was received, let both players know when it is under review, and let both players know what actions were taken as a result of the report).

6. Prohibit players from making new accounts once they have been banned. This would decrease the risk of 2SLGBTQI players being doxxed, outed, and continually harmed.

Conclusion

Through our virtual focus groups and virtual Knowledge Sharing Day, we were able to engage in deep and meaningful conversations with a subset of 2SLGBTQI youth gamers in Ontario about their experiences in esports. Unfortunately, participants shared their experiences with different forms and types of cyber violence as part of their everyday gaming. However, these generative conversations also revealed that 2SLGBTQI youth gamers are actively supporting one another online and engaging in strategies that help keep themselves and others safe. Beyond reporting systems, participants called upon the esports industry to make changes in front of and behind the camera to help cultivate a safer online space for 2SLGBTQI youth. When implemented, these changes will allow 2SLGBTQI youth transnationally to be able to participate more fully in esports.

References

Bell, B. (2019, August 21). *Twitch ban ends for top esports pro after using homophobic slur.* Outsports. https://www.outsports.com/2019/8/21/20813454/homophobia-esports-s1mple-slur-twitch-ban-csgo

Brown, Z. [@zandashe]. (2021, May 18). I dream of never being called resilient again in my life. I'm exhausted by strength. I want support. [Tweet]. Twitter. https://twitter.com/zandashe/status/1394805726825099279

Dela Cruz, A. (2021). Playing "safe" and troubling youth: An esports literature review. Toronto, ON: Egale Canada.

Dyer, H. (2017). Queer futurity and childhood innocence: Beyond the injury of development. *Global Studies of Childhood*, *7*(3), 290-302.

Dyer, H. (2019). The contested design of children's sexual education: queer growth and epistemic uncertainty. *Gender and Education*, *31*(6), 742-755.

Fox, J., & Tang, W. Y. (2017). Women's experiences with general and sexual harassment in online video games: Rumination, organizational responsiveness, withdrawal, and coping strategies. *New Media & Society*, *19*(8), 1290-1307. doi:10.1177/1461444816635778

Furlong, A. (2015). *Transitions, cultures, and identities: What is Youth studies?* In Youth Cultures, Transitions, and Generations. Palgrave Macmillan, London.

Halberstam, J. (2005). *In a queer time and place: Transgender bodies, subcultural lives*. New York: New York UP.

Hoffman, B., Ware, J., & Shapiro, E. (2020). Assessing the threat of incel violence. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, *43*(7), 565-587.

Hokka, J. (2020). PewDiePie, racism and Youtube's neoliberalist interpretation of freedom of speech. *Convergence*, *27*(1), 142–160. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856520938602

Jenson, J., & de Castell, S. (2018). "The entrepreneurial gamer": Regendering the order of play. *Games and Culture*, *13*(7), 728-746.

Lobel, A., Engels, R. C., Stone, L. L., Burk, W. J., & Granic, I. (2017). Video gaming and children's psychosocial wellbeing: A longitudinal study. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 46*(4), 884-897.

Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches by Audre Lorde.* New York: Crossing Press.

McKinnon, A. (2018, May 07). *Extreme eSports: The very male, billion-dollar gaming industry at a stadium near you.* The Guardian. Retrieved from: https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2018/may/08/extreme-esports-the-very-male-billion-dollar-gaming-industry-at-a-stadium-near-you

Romano, A. (2019, March 16). *How the Christchurch shooter used memes to spread hate.* Vox. Retrieved from: https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/3/16/18266930/christchurch-shooter-manifesto-memes-subscribe-to-pewdiepie

Ruberg, B., Cullen, A. L., & Brewster, K. (2019). Nothing but a "titty streamer": legitimacy, labor, and the debate over women's breasts in video game live streaming. *Critical Studies in Media Communication, 36*(5), 466-481.

Quinn, Z. (2017, September 11). *What it feels like to have your passwords hacked by hundreds.* TIME. Retrieved from: https://time.com/4927076/zoe-quinn-gamergate-doxxing-crash-override- excerpt/

Sacco, D. (2020, April 23). *Former NSG players banned from SQ1 League of Legends tournament after making transphobic comments.* Esports News UK. Retrieved from: https://esports-news.co.uk/2020/04/23/former-nsg-players-banned-sq1-transphobic-comments/

Thacker, S., & Griffiths, M. D. (2012). An exploratory study of trolling in online video gaming. *International Journal of Cyber Behavior, Psychology and Learning, 2*(4), 17-33.

Tuck, E. (2009). Suspending damage: A letter to communities. *Harvard Educational Review, 79*(3), 409-428.

West, J. (2014). *Cyber-violence against women.* Battered Women's Support Services. Retrieved from: https:// www.bwss.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/CyberVAWReportJessicaWest.pdf

Appendix A – Methodology Continued

As aforementioned, this research project consisted of two phases: 1) focus groups and 2) a Knowledge Sharing Day event. The overall objective of this research project was to better understand the experiences of cyber violence that 2SLGBTQI have when gaming online as well as to determine the ways that the esports industry can better care *for* and *about* 2SLGBTQI youth.

The specific aim of the focus groups was to better understand the experiences of young 2SLGBTQI gamers living in Ontario and identify how 2SLGBTQI youth have been supporting themselves as well as each other while gaming. The focus groups were facilitated by the Lead Researcher as well as another member of the Egale team. In 3 weeks, this team conducted 4 virtual focus groups, each consisting of 4–8 young 2SLGBTQI gamers living in Ontario, with 23 participants overall ranging in age from 16 to 30. The research team also aimed to amplify the voices of Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) as well as trans and nonbinary participants. As such, each group consisted of at least 1/3 trans and nonbinary participants and 1/3 BIPOC participants. Focus groups were recorded by note-taking and audio recording. Once transcribed, we used a thematic analysis on the focus group transcripts to determine key themes and findings.

The preliminary findings from the focus groups were presented at a Knowledge Sharing Day held on June 4, 2021. 16 participants attended the event. The Lead Researcher along with 5 Egale staff conducted smaller discussions, each with 4–6 participants. The aim of the Knowledge Sharing Day discussions was to build on the findings of the focus groups by allowing 2SLGBTQI youth to outline their needs and identify the ways that the esports industry can better care *for* and *about* young 2SLGBTQI gamers. The Knowledge Sharing Day notes were also analyzed using a thematic analysis to pull out key themes and findings.

Appendix B – Focus Group Questions

1. How did you first get involved with gaming/esports?

2. How do you feel when you're playing and participating in esports?

3. What are reasons that you have left certain gaming spaces?

4. How have you navigated and negotiated any troubling or negative experiences you've had in esports spaces?

5. What facilitates a positive experience for you in esports?

6. Which gaming/esports communities are doing things better? Why?

7. What kind of changes would you like to see in the esports industry and esports communities that would help you participate more fully and safely in these spaces?

8. Is there anything we haven't touched on today that you would like to let us know?

Appendix C – Knowledge Sharing Day Prompts

1. What does your utopian version of esports look like (in competition, in daily gaming, etc.)? In other words, what do you want esports to look like?

2. What improved material conditions would you like to be implemented by the esports industry and other gaming authorities? In other words, how do we get to the utopian place that you described in prompt 1?

3. How do you experience and facilitate care, support, and safety in esports?

4. Where do you want this project to go?

Egale

📍 Suite 217–120 Carlton Street,
Toronto, ON. M5A 4K2

📞 (416) 964–7887

✉️ research@egale.ca

🌐 www.egale.ca