



Empowering Female Students through Esports Programs: Insights from a Vocational High School

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Abstract: This paper explores gender dynamics within a vocational Esports high school, focusing on the experiences of female students. Utilizing Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) and Digital Feminism as theoretical frameworks, the research examines how educational practices, digital cultures, and socio-cultural contexts influence participation and identity formation among female students. Data collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis highlight significant disparities in participation and the impact of institutional structures on gender norms. Findings reveal that while competitive Esports environments often perpetuate traditional gender roles, collaborative settings in coding and design facilitate more inclusive interactions and empower female students. The study proposes strategic educational modifications to foster gender equity and suggests that vocational Esports programs can effectively challenge and transform gender norms in educational settings.

Keywords: *Gender Equity, Esports Education, Vocational Training, STEM Education, Digital Feminism*

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The Rise of the Digital Arena

The integration of Esports into educational curricula represents a transformation in educational paradigms, illustrating the profound impact of digital cultures on learning environments and career pathways, highlighting how digital cultures shape learning environments and career opportunities. Historically viewed as entertainment, Esports has

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evolved into a robust industry with substantial economic impact, with global market revenue surpassing \$1.5 billion as of 2023 (Newzoo, 2020). This expansion reflects broader increase digital consumption and the increasing legitimacy of gaming as a professional and academic field. In educational practices, particularly within vocational high schools—institutions that focus on equipping students with specialized career and technical skills—Esports serves as a conduit for diverse competencies encompassing technical aptitude, strategic planning, and collaborative teamwork (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). These institutions are both preparing students for gaming careers and leveraging Esports as a new pathway for broader educational outcomes, including digital literacy and social competency (Ranucci, 2022). Furthermore, vocational high schools utilizing an Esports curriculum are uniquely positioned to explore and influence societal trends, such as integrating digital technology into education (Richard & Gray, 2018).

Thus, Esports in educational settings serve a dual function: they equip students with new skills necessary for thriving in a rapidly expanding industry while offering a lens through which to analyze the socio-cultural impacts of digital media. (Kafai et al., 2010; Richard & Gray, 2018). According to Taylor (2018) and Prescott and Bogg (2014), competitive environments in digital media often mirror and magnify existing societal gender norms, influencing perceptions and behaviors. By integrating Esports into their curricula, vocational high schools actively participate in the sociocultural discourse, positioning themselves as pivotal venues for investigating and influencing gender dynamics within digital culture (Jenson & de Castell, 2010; Richard & Gray, 2018). Therefore, these educational settings play a crucial role in preparing students for future careers and shaping the frameworks through which gender equity is understood and potentially transformed.

Esports 101: Beyond Casual Gaming

Esports, short for electronic sports, refers to organized, competitive video gaming, often between professional players or teams. Unlike casual gaming, Esports is characterized by its structured leagues, tournaments, and substantial prize pools, with competitions spanning a wide variety of video game genres including strategy, sports, and first-person shooters. Further distinguishing traditional, casual video gaming from Esports is the formalized competition and the large-scale professional ecosystem surrounding it, including coaches, analysts, and sponsorships akin to traditional athletic sports. This distinction is important in educational settings because while video games can be a leisure activity, Esports incorporates the dynamics of teamwork, strategy, and skill development that mirror many of the competencies needed for future digital careers. In this research study, Esports is analyzed as a pedagogical tool that fosters technical and strategic skills as well as serves as an entry point for addressing gender disparities in STEM and technology-related fields. By integrating Esports into educational settings, institutions create opportunities for diverse student populations to engage with digital literacy, computational thinking, and collaborative problem-solving which are areas traditionally dominated by male participation.

Identifying the Boss Level: Gender Challenges in Esports

Despite the initial integration of Esports into educational settings, significant gender disparities in participation and representation persist (Cunningham, 2006; Taylor, 2018). These disparities are embodied in vocational high schools, where diverse career pathways should

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ideally support gender equity (Shaw, 2014; Taylor, 2012). Researchers (Bristot et al., 2018; Witkowski, 2012a) pointed out that while involvement in Esports can bolster cognitive, social, and emotional skills, female students remain underrepresented in the industry and confront unique challenges that can adversely affect their educational trajectories and career prospects in this emerging field. Similar to the STEM field (Jenson & de Castell, 2010), these challenges are emblematic of the broader gender disparities within digital and gaming cultures, where societal norms often perpetuate gender biases (Fox & Tang, 2017). Addressing these disparities necessitate a focused examination of the educational structures and cultural norms currently shaping Esports programs in vocational settings to uncover and mitigate the barriers hindering female participation and success.

Quest Purposes: Unpacking Gender Dynamics

This study aims to explore the gender dynamics within a vocational Esports high school using a qualitative case study approach. Traditionally, vocational education bridges the gap between academic theory and industry practice, preparing students for specific professions through a curriculum that combines theoretical knowledge with practical skills (Freeman & Wohn, 2017). The inclusion of Esports in vocational education reflects a broader shift in workforce preparation, where emerging digital industries influence curricular decisions. This integration is driven by institutional stakeholders recognizing the economic potential of Esports and the growing need for skills in digital media, game development, and event management. As a result, Esports programs within vocational schools not only cater to industry demands but also serve as a response to shifting norms around digital literacy and career viability in technology-driven fields (Seo & Jung, 2016). By employing Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) and Digital Feminism as theoretical frameworks, this research seeks to unravel the interconnectedness between digital culture, educational practices, and gender dynamics. These frameworks will facilitate a nuanced understanding of how these elements shape the experiences and identities of female students in the Esports domain (Daniels, 2009; Engeström, 2001).

In addition to identifying the barriers to inclusion faced by female students in Esports education, this study also focuses on activity systems—comprising the tools, rules, and community norms within Esports educational settings—which allows for an analysis of how gender norms are perpetuated (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006) so that they can be challenged. By understanding these activity systems, the research aims to propose pedagogical and policy-oriented strategies that can mitigate gender disparities. This study contributes to broader discussions on how educational settings can act as catalysts for social equity. Through exploring how the integration of Esports into school curricula may enhance learning outcomes, this study proposes that the gamification of learning and Esport in vocational schools could serve as a platform for countering and transforming gender norms (Prescott & Bogg, 2014) found in traditionally male-dominated professions. By advocating for a more inclusive Esports education, this research aligns with the efforts to reshape educational practices to promote campus inclusivity and diversity (Richard & Gray, 2018).

Literature Review: Scouting the Terrain

Mapping the Esports Ecosystem

Esports, or electronic sports, refers to competitive multiplayer video game tournaments, often involving professional players or teams competing in organized leagues (Taylor, 2018). Over the last two decades, Esports has experienced exponential growth, driven by advancements in technology, the internet, and social media, expanding from niche gatherings to global events that fill stadiums and attract millions of viewers (Hamilton et al., 2014). Supported by a robust infrastructure of teams, leagues, sponsorships, and media coverage, Esports has gained mainstream recognition, even being considered for inclusion in international sporting events like the Olympic Games (Taylor, 2018).

This thriving industry is projected to generate over one billion dollars annually, highlighting its growing economic significance within the entertainment and media sectors (Nelson & Lawrence, 2021). The Esports ecosystem comprises game developers, players, spectators, and broadcasters, all contributing to its rapid evolution (Newzoo, 2020). As Esports continues to gain traction, educational institutions are recognizing its potential as a tool for enhancing students' skills in strategic thinking, teamwork, and communication (Witkowski, 2012b). Schools and universities are increasingly integrating Esports programs to engage students and prepare them for careers in the expanding digital economy, reflecting broader trends in digital literacy and technology integration (Verdoodt et al., 2021). Additionally, Esports fosters 21st-century skills such as collaboration and critical thinking, aligning with educational competencies outlined by Jenkins (2009). Research by Freeman and Wohn (2017) further underscores the benefits of Esports programs in developing students' social and emotional skills. However, the integration of Esports into educational settings is not without its challenges. Despite the increasing participation of female gamers, women remain underrepresented in professional Esports, and gender disparities persist (Richard & Gray, 2018). Factors such as cultural perceptions of gaming as a male-dominated activity and the prevalence of harassment and bias in gaming communities continue to hinder female participation (Bristot et al., 2019). Addressing these issues is essential for realizing the full educational potential of Esports. As Esports evolves, it presents opportunities for promoting inclusivity, interdisciplinary collaboration, and digital citizenship, but this requires ongoing research and the development of thoughtful policies to ensure equitable participation for all students (Taylor, 2018).

Character Profiles: Females in the Gaming World

According to the Entertainment Software Association (2020), approximately 46% of gamers are female, yet this demographic is vastly underrepresented in the professional Esports scene. As Taylor (2012) points out, gaming culture has historically been male-dominated, and female gamers often face marginalization and underrepresentation, particularly when it comes to recognition and career advancement in Esports. This underrepresentation not only reinforces existing gender stereotypes but also limits the opportunities available to women in gaming-related careers. The portrayal of female characters in video games has been a significant factor contributing to the broader issue of gender inequality in gaming. Studies by Prescott and Bogg (2014) highlight a persistent trend where male protagonists dominate video games, while female characters are frequently relegated to secondary or objectified roles. Often designed with exaggerated sexual characteristics, these female characters are typically positioned as side

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characters, emphasizing their appearance over their abilities or narrative importance. This portrayal influences players' perceptions of gender roles within gaming and beyond, shaping how both male and female gamers internalize societal norms around gender (Fox & Tang 2017).

Examples from mainstream games illustrate this trend. In the *League of Legends* series, characters like Ahri the Nine-Tailed Fox and Miss Fortune the Bounty Hunter embody these problematic representations. Ahri's design emphasizes charm and allure, reinforcing stereotypes of femininity, while Miss Fortune is often portrayed in revealing outfits, underscoring the ongoing trend of sexualizing female characters, even those in roles traditionally associated with power and aggression (Burgess et al., 2007). Ivory (2006) further explores how these depictions influence broader gender dynamics, suggesting that the frequent portrayal of women in passive or sexualized roles reinforces outdated stereotypes and limits how both genders perceive women's abilities in and outside of gaming contexts. This gendered representation has tangible effects on the gaming community. Lynch, Tompkins, van Driel, and Fritz (2016) found that such stereotypes can decrease the presence of female gamers and alienate them, perpetuating a gender gap in gaming engagement and retention. Female gamers often find it difficult to fully participate or identify with these characters, leading to decreased involvement in certain genres and reinforcing the perception of gaming as a male-dominated space.

Efforts to counteract these disparities have included initiatives aimed at creating more inclusive gaming communities and developing games that challenge traditional gender norms. Organizations like AnyKey, for example, advocate for diversity and inclusion in gaming, providing resources and support for underrepresented gamers (AnyKey Organization 2021). Additionally, more recent portrayals of female characters have attempted to subvert traditional gender roles. The reimagining of Lara Croft in the *Tomb Raider* series is a prime example. In the 2013 reboot and subsequent releases, Lara Croft is portrayed as a more realistic, relatable character whose strength, intelligence, and resilience take precedence over her sexuality (Kennedy 2016). This shift resonated with a wider audience and demonstrated the potential for strong female leads to challenge gender stereotypes in action-oriented games. Similarly, Aloy from *Horizon Zero Dawn* serves as another example of a female character breaking away from traditional portrayals. As a skilled warrior and hunter in a post-apocalyptic world, Aloy's character is defined by her abilities and leadership, rather than her appearance or relationships, marking a departure from the objectified roles often assigned to female characters in video games (Forni 2020).

Despite these positive developments, significant challenges remain in achieving gender equity in the gaming world. Harassment and toxicity continue to plague gaming environments, particularly for women. Bristot et al. (2019) point out that the persistence of these issues deters many women from participating fully in the gaming community. Fox and Tang (2017) further illustrate the extent of this harassment, which can range from sexist remarks to more severe forms of abuse, such as threats of violence. These hostile interactions create a toxic environment that discourages women from engaging in certain gaming genres, limiting their opportunities for participation and career growth. Griffiths et al. (2013) also suggest that the normalization of harassment within gaming communities perpetuates these behaviors, making them harder to address. The anonymity of online gaming environments often exacerbates this problem. Wang (2018) argues that the lack of face-to-face interaction in these spaces reduces accountability, enabling individuals to engage in hostile behavior they might otherwise avoid in physical settings. This dynamic is particularly problematic in competitive gaming, where tensions run high, and the stakes are often perceived as significant.

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The integration of Esports and gaming into educational settings presents a unique opportunity to challenge gender dynamics. Research by Witkowski (2012a) highlights how structured Esports programs within schools can foster a sense of community and teamwork, which is foundational to creating inclusive environments. Additionally, Granic, Lobel, and Engels (2014) suggest that gaming can be utilized as a platform for teaching emotional and social learning skills, which are critical in combating gender-based stereotypes and promoting gender equality. These programs, when designed with inclusivity in mind, can help students navigate issues of online behavior, respect, and the consequences of toxicity, preparing them for more positive interactions within the gaming community. Moreover, integrating Esports into educational curricula can serve as a catalyst for broader cultural change within the gaming industry. Prescott and Bogg (2014) argue that promoting diversity and inclusion from an educational standpoint can influence the future development of game designs, marketing strategies, and community management practices, reflecting a more equitable representation of gender. This approach benefits female students by providing them with opportunities to engage in gaming on equal terms, promoting values that transcend the gaming world and impact broader societal interactions (Kafai et al. 2018).

Gaming Framework: Applying CHAT and Digital Feminism

This study of gender dynamics within Esports education is anchored in two critical theoretical frameworks: Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) and Digital Feminism. These frameworks provide powerful lenses through which the interconnectedness of educational practices, digital culture, and gender can be examined and understood.

Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), derived from the work of Lev Vygotsky (1978), offers a valuable tool for analyzing the social contexts and systems within which learning occurs. CHAT focuses on the interactions between individuals and their environments, emphasizing how cultural artifacts, community, and institutional norms shape human activity (Engeström 2001). Within the context of Esports education, CHAT allows us to examine how educational settings, gaming culture, and the tools of Esports—such as video games and gaming platforms—mediate educational outcomes. When applied to the study of gender norms in Esports, CHAT helps illuminate how specific mediators—like tools, rules, community, and the division of labor—shape gender identities and either perpetuate or challenge existing gender norms. For example, tools in Esports, including gaming hardware and software, are critical in understanding gendered access. Research by Jenson and de Castell (2010) shows that if female students have less access to advanced gaming equipment or are not encouraged to engage with competitive gaming software, it can reinforce existing stereotypes about technology and gender. Conversely, equitable access to these tools can empower female students and challenge the dominant assumption that technology and gaming are male domains.

Rules also play a significant role in shaping participation. Formal and informal regulations governing Esports can implicitly favor aggressive play styles, which are often culturally associated with male gamers. Such rules may deter female participation or reinforce perceptions of women as less competent players (Taylor 2012). By analyzing these rules, we can uncover how they shape both the participation and identity of female students within the Esports environment.

CHAT emphasizes the role of community in shaping activity. The broader gaming community—including peers, instructors, and gaming networks—greatly influences how gender norms are expressed and enforced. Richard and Gray (2018) highlight the importance of

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supportive communities in creating inclusive environments that challenge traditional gender roles. Within Esports programs, the presence of role models, peer support groups, and inclusive gaming clubs can foster a more welcoming environment for female students, allowing them to thrive in a space that is typically dominated by male norms.

Finally, the division of labor in Esports education offers insights into how gendered roles are distributed within teams and gaming activities. Female students may be relegated to peripheral or supporting roles, while male students dominate leadership positions (Bristol et al. 2019). Analyzing this division of labor through a CHAT framework enables us to identify these imbalances and propose strategies to create more equitable opportunities for leadership and active participation for female students.

Digital Feminism extends the discourse of feminism into the digital space, exploring how digital cultures both influence and are influenced by gendered power relations. This framework focuses on issues of access, representation, and identity within online environments (Daniels 2009). In the context of Esports, Digital Feminism provides a critical perspective on how gender is constructed, contested, and negotiated in digital gaming communities.

Digital Feminism also highlights the barriers that women face in digital spaces, such as harassment, exclusion, and underrepresentation. Massanari (2017) points out that digital platforms can reinforce traditional gender roles, but they also have the potential to empower women by providing spaces for resistance and advocacy. In the case of Esports, female students may face marginalization in competitive environments, yet they can also find solidarity and empowerment through online communities or gaming groups that prioritize inclusivity (Richard & Gray; Shaw 2014).

Moreover, Digital Feminism helps identify how digital platforms can be leveraged to challenge traditional gender norms. For instance, female gamers who actively participate in online communities may resist societal expectations, using digital platforms as spaces to assert their identities and advocate for gender equity (Daniels, 2009). This is particularly relevant in Esports, where digital spaces often serve as both arenas of competition and places of community building. By integrating the perspectives of Digital Feminism, we can better understand how female students navigate these spaces to challenge or subvert the gendered power dynamics that exist within the broader gaming culture.

Integrating both CHAT and Digital Feminism allows for a comprehensive analysis of the structural and cultural dimensions of gender within Esports education. These frameworks help us examine how educational settings function as activity systems where social structures and cultural artifacts—such as gaming platforms and school policies—interact with personal actions and community practices (Kaptelinin & Nardi 2006). Furthermore, by combining these perspectives, we can better critique the digital culture that pervades Esports, highlighting how online environments simultaneously empower and marginalize female gamers (Massanari 2017). This dual approach provides a deeper understanding of the observable practices within educational settings and the underlying digital cultural forces that influence them.

Methodology: Crafting the Playbook

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative case study methodology, drawing on the work of Yin (2014) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016), to examine gender dynamics within a vocational Esports high school designated as ESWT High in this study. A case study approach enables a deep,

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contextually rich exploration of the social, cultural, and institutional factors shaping gendered experiences within Esports education. This methodology facilitates an in-depth investigation of ESWT High's educational practices, student interactions, and the embedded cultural norms influencing female students' participation in Esports. Through this approach, the study seeks to generate insights that extend beyond ESWT High, contributing to broader discussions on gender and digital culture in educational settings.

Context

ESWT High, situated in an urban center recognized for its strong technological infrastructure and educational resources, has emerged as a pioneering institution in integrating Esports into vocational education. The school serves a diverse student body of approximately 500 students and has maintained a dedicated Esports program for over five years. As part of a forward-thinking district known for aligning educational programs with evolving industry needs, ESWT High was strategically selected for this case study due to its distinctive position within the K-12 system. It is among the few vocational high schools offering a specialized Esports program that not only enhances students' technical and strategic skills but also provides opportunities for participation in regional and national competitions. The school's infrastructure includes gaming labs, digital media production studios, and collaborative workspaces that mirror industry-standard environments. Moreover, its faculty comprises professionals from the Esports sector, ensuring that students receive industry-relevant knowledge and practical insights.

Research Questions

To explore the gender dynamics within a vocational Esports high school, this study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do the socio-cultural and historical contexts of Esports influence gender dynamics within a vocational Esports high school?
2. What educational practices and structures within vocational Esports settings perpetuate or challenge traditional gender norms?
3. How do female students navigate their identity within an Esports-focused educational environment?
4. How do female students engage and participate in an Esports-focused educational environment?

Data Collection

Data were collected using a combination of semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and document analysis.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of 15 participants, including students (n=8), faculty members (n=4), and administrators (n=3) involved in the Esports program at ESWT High. Each interview lasted between 45 to 75 minutes and was conducted either in person or via video conferencing. Interview questions focused on participants' experiences with the Esports curriculum, perceptions of gender dynamics, and the impact of these dynamics on student engagement and career aspirations. This approach aligns

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with qualitative case study methodology, enabling an in-depth exploration of lived experiences (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

Observations

The researcher conducted 20 hours of participant observation across training sessions, classroom discussions, and competitive events. Observations focused on social interactions, gendered behaviors, and instructional practices within the Esports environment. The researcher recorded field notes, emphasizing patterns in engagement, collaboration, and exclusionary practices. This method allowed for data triangulation, capturing aspects of gendered experiences that might not be fully articulated in interviews (Kawulich, 2005).

Document Analysis

Relevant school documents, including curriculum guides, promotional materials, and policy documents related to Esports and gender equity, were analyzed. Document analysis helped contextualize the institutional attitudes and approaches toward gender inclusivity within the Esports program. This approach is crucial for understanding the formal and informal rules (Prior, 2003) that govern educational settings.

Data Analysis

Data collected from interviews, observations, and documents were analyzed using thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method enabled identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within the data. Initially, the data were coded in an iterative manner to refine and categorize themes that emerged prominently across the dataset. This coding process involved multiple rounds of refinement to ensure the themes accurately reflected the underlying data.

After the initial coding phase, themes were reviewed and defined. This part of the analysis focused on how each theme related to the theoretical frameworks of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) and Digital Feminism. The thematic analysis also involved critically examining discrepancies between data sources to ensure a better understanding of the observed phenomena. This triangulation of data sources (Creswell, 2013) helped enhance the findings' consistency and credibility. The final step in the analysis involved mapping the themes against the research questions to ensure that all aspects of the study's objectives were addressed.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to strict ethical guidelines to protect participants and ensure the validity of the findings. Ethical approval for the research was obtained from the relevant institutional review board (IRB), and all participants provided informed consent prior to participating in interviews and observations. The following key strategies were implemented to address potential ethical concerns:

Mitigating Bias

To minimize researcher bias, reflexive practices were employed throughout the study. The researcher maintained a reflexive journal to critically reflect on their positionality and the

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potential impact of personal assumptions on the interpretation of data. Additionally, efforts were made to recruit a diverse group of female participants in terms of their level of engagement with the Esports program (e.g., competitive and non-competitive players) and their roles within the school's gaming community, such as team captains, casual players, and student organizers. Outreach was conducted through school announcements, faculty recommendations, and direct invitations during Esports club meetings to encourage participation from individuals with varying experiences. This diversity allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of female students' experiences. According to Sieber (2006), addressing diversity in participant selection is crucial for ensuring that research findings are valid and reflective of varied experiences within the study population.

Ensuring Transparency

Multiple strategies were used to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. Credibility was strengthened through data triangulation, collecting insights from diverse sources, including interviews, observations, and relevant documentation, to provide a holistic understanding of the research context. Member reflections were also employed, allowing participants to engage with preliminary interpretations and provide feedback to refine the analysis. This process fostered transparency and ensured that the findings authentically represented participants' lived experiences.

Confidentiality and Participant Protection

The confidentiality and anonymity of all participants were strictly maintained. Pseudonyms were used for all interviewees, and identifiable details were omitted from the final report. Participants were reminded of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty. All data were securely stored, and access was limited to the research team to ensure participant safety. Additionally, participants were debriefed after the study, ensuring they understood how their data would be used and providing an opportunity to ask any further questions.

Findings

The following section outlines the core themes identified in the analysis, providing a structured framework for understanding the lived experiences of female students in the Esports program. These themes emerged through iterative coding and analysis of interviews, observations, and relevant institutional documents, revealing key insights into gender dynamics within Esports education. Table 1 presents a thematic analysis summary, categorizing the major themes and illustrating their alignment with the study's research questions. The findings are organized into four sections, each corresponding to one of the four research questions. While the subheadings do not appear as questions, they are designed to thematically respond to the respective inquiries regarding identity, participation, educational structures, and sociocultural contexts. Each theme represents an interconnected aspect of the participants' experiences, highlighting structural barriers, cultural norms, and pathways of resistance. The themes will be further elaborated in the subsequent discussion, with representative excerpts demonstrating their significance in shaping student participation and engagement.

Table 1

Thematic Analysis Summary

Theme	Supporting Data Excerpts	Research Question
Identity Negotiation	“The competitive atmosphere is tough, and there's a real pressure to conform to aggressive styles that don't reflect who I am.”	RQ4: How do female students navigate their identity in an Esports-focused educational environment?
Participation Barriers	“In competitions, I feel like I have to prove myself twice as hard.”	RQ3: How do female students engage in participation in an Esports-focused educational environment?
Mentorship and Support	“Having a mentor who understands the challenges I face is really helpful.”	RQ2: How do educational structures and practices impact gender norms in Esports?
Community and Informal Networks	“We started a gaming group, and it's been a safe space to just be ourselves and play without judgment.”	RQ2: How do educational structures and practices impact gender norms in Esports?
Technology Access and Confidence	“Getting used to the high-end rigs was a bit intimidating at first. I didn't have that kind of setup at home like some of the guys did.”	RQ1: How do sociocultural and historical contexts influence gender dynamics in Esports?
Harassment and Inclusivity	“The boys don't seem to realize how much space they take up, and sometimes my ideas get drowned out.”	RQ3: How do female students engage in participation in an Esports-focused educational environment?

Finding 1: Sociocultural and Historical Contexts' Influence on Gender Dynamics

This section examines how sociocultural and historical contexts shape the gender dynamics observed at ESWT High, particularly within its Esports program. The findings draw upon interviews, observations, and document analysis, illustrating how societal perceptions of gender roles influence student experiences and expectations.

Interview Insights

Interviews conducted with students, faculty, and coaches at ESWT High revealed nuanced perspectives on the gender dynamics within the school's Esports program. These discussions highlighted the contrasts between female students' experiences in competitive gaming versus their involvement in other areas like coding and design.

One female student on the varsity Esports team shared her experience, emphasizing the isolation she feels: “Being the only girl on the team, it's tough.” When prompted to elaborate, she added, “It's like you're constantly having to prove yourself ...in what many see as a boys'

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world.” Her team coach echoed her sentiment and noted, “We’re trying to foster teamwork, but there’s an obvious gap. The boys sometimes overlook her contributions, which is something we’re actively working to change.” Paused, he added, “Like, we’ve started to incorporate more examples of successful female and non-binary gamers to provide our students with a broader perspective.”

Conversely, interviews with female students engaged in the school’s coding and design classes painted a different picture. One remarked, “In coding, it’s your skills that talk.” Another echoed, “It feels like what matters is... your code running smoothly.” Meanwhile, a faculty member involved in digital media courses observed, “The girls in my classes are thriving because we focus on creativity and skill, not competition. It’s a more collaborative environment, which seems to empower them... Better than the competitive gaming.” These contrasting experiences highlight the variable impact of the school’s educational environment on gender dynamics. For instance, a female student mentioned:

I was part of the group project that redesigned famous female game characters to be more diverse.... It felt good to bring a female perspective into our projects, showing that women can be more than just supporting roles, or amateur players; they can be creators who change the gaming culture

A school administrator also participated in the interviews to provide additional context from a leadership perspective and shared, “We’re aware of these disparities and are in the process of revising our Esports curriculum to include more collaborative projects where everyone, regardless of gender, can contribute equally.” He continued, “I do believe we need to balance competition with collaboration.”

These insights illustrate the challenges female students face in breaking into traditionally male-dominated areas of Esports and the opportunities that exist in more equitable and collaborative educational settings. These participant quotes help to bring these issues to life, offering a vivid snapshot of the ongoing efforts to address gender equity in a vocational Esports educational context.

Observational Insights

Field observations conducted at ESWT High provided a glimpse into the gender dynamics. These observations highlighted the disparities in participation and engagement between male and female students, particularly in the varsity Esports team and other tech-related activities. During a typical varsity Esports practice session, the dynamics were stark. The male students dominated both the gameplay and the strategic discussions that followed. Male students tended to talk over their female teammates, who often hesitated before speaking. Notably, during these sessions, the coach had to remind the team to allow everyone to speak repeatedly. Field notes from this observation highlight one moment where the female student tried to suggest a new strategy but was quickly overshadowed by louder voices and her idea was dismissed without consideration.

Conversely, in the character redesigning workshop, the atmosphere was different. Here, female students were much more engaged and vocal. Observational notes describe a scene where a female student led her group’s presentation, confidently explaining the design choices specifically aimed at “promoting gender fluidity” in-game characters. The reaction from the classroom was generally positive, with peers from all genders engaging in a meaningful and

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constructive discussion about their opinions. Another observation in the coding lab showed similar trends of inclusivity. Female students were seen fully engaged in troubleshooting and collaborating on par with their peers. An interesting moment captured in the field notes occurred when a female student solved a particularly challenging bug in the game code, which was met with supportive cheers from the whole workshop. These observational insights underscore the influence of competitive versus collaborative settings on gender dynamics and participation. The positive responses to female leadership in design and coding suggest that when the educational environment promotes inclusivity and collaboration, gender disparities are less pronounced, allowing female students to speak up more confidently and take on more visible and influential roles.

Document Analysis

Analysis of the school's promotional materials and curriculum documents revealed an emphasis on success stories of male students and alumni in Esports, with little mention of female students' achievements. This kind of representation can reinforce the perception that Esports is a male-dominated field, potentially discouraging female students from participating

Theoretical Integration

The divergent participation patterns observed between competitive Esports sessions and collaborative coding or design classes can be analyzed through these theoretical lenses to understand the underlying gender dynamics:

According to CHAT, an activity system's tools, rules, and community significantly shape interactions and outcomes (Engeström, 2001). In competitive Esports sessions, traditional gaming tools and the rules of competitive play often reinforce male dominance and aggressive behaviors, which are culturally coded as masculine. This aligns with CHAT's emphasis on how cultural artifacts (like gaming software) and institutional norms (such as competition rules) mediate social interactions and learning outcomes. Conversely, in the collaborative settings of coding and design workshops, the tools (software for design and coding) and the community norms (focused on creativity and problem-solving) facilitate a more equitable environment where female students thrive and take on leadership roles.

Meanwhile, Digital Feminism provides a lens to understand how digital spaces can reproduce or challenge gender inequity. The contrast in female students' experiences across different settings highlights how digital environments can be structured to perpetuate traditional gender roles or empower women (Daniels, 2009). In the varsity Esports team, the digital interaction patterns often mirrored broader societal biases, marginalizing female participation. However, the digital space was a platform for empowerment and visibility in coding and design, demonstrating how alternative digital cultures can foster gender equity.

Finding 2: Educational Structures and Practices Impact on Gender Norms

This section of the findings explores how the specific educational structures and practices implemented at ESWT High influence gender norms and dynamics within the school's Esports program. Insights were gleaned from interviews, observations, and document analysis, highlighting the school's role in perpetuating traditional gender norms or fostering an equity environment.

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Interview Insights

Interviews with faculty and students revealed mixed feelings about the effectiveness of current educational practices in promoting gender equity. A female student interviewed expressed satisfaction with their school's innovative curriculum, stating, "Our school allow us to express different perspectives, which I think helps debunking a lot of stereotypes about what girls *can* or *cannot* do." However, another female member noted:

I sometimes feel the classes are tailored more towards the boys, especially when it comes to selecting which games we use as examples, for discussions or group projects... It's like they assume girls aren't interested in certain types of games

A school administrator reflected on the recruitment and training practices, "We've been trying to recruit more girls into the program by showcasing our successful female alumni, but there's still a sense that Esports is a boys' club... or worse, bad kids' club." The additional sentiment of *bad kids' club* indicates a dual-layered stigma not only against female participation but also against the Esports activity itself within the broader educational or community context. This could reflect traditional biases against gaming, often seen as a less valuable or less constructive activity than other extracurriculars. Such stigma could be particularly challenging for female students who might already be battling stereotypes about their suitability for gaming and tech-related fields.

Observational Insights

During Esports practice sessions and classroom activities, observations provided concrete examples of how gender norms are reinforced or challenged. For instance, boys were often chosen first during team selection when forming teams for popular games like first-person shooters (FPS), which are perceived as more competitive and aggressive. This practice subtly reinforces the stereotype that such games are better suited for boys. However, in coding and design classes, the division of labor was less noticeable. Projects were often assigned in a way that required collaborative input from all students, regardless of gender. Observations noted that female students were particularly active and engaged in roles that required both technical skill and creative input, suggesting that when given equal opportunities, gender disparities in participation diminished.

Theoretical Integration

CHAT emphasizes the role of cultural tools, rules, and the community in shaping human activities and interactions. In the context of ESWT High. The school's promotional materials and curriculum design act as *cultural* tools that either perpetuate the perception of Esports as a male-dominated field or attempt to counteract these stereotypes by highlighting female achievements and diversifying gaming genres to be more inclusive. Recruitment practices and team selection processes are institutional *rules* that currently favor traditional, competitive aspects of gaming, often aligning with male-dominated norms. Observations indicated a need for rules that promote equal participation and recognize diverse talents beyond competitive gaming, which could help dismantle the prevailing 'boys' club' mentality. *Community* norms within the Esports program, as observed during practices and classroom interactions, often mirror broader societal biases.

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However, in settings where collaboration and creativity were emphasized, such as coding and design classes, gender norms were visibly less rigid, suggesting a pathway toward more equitable engagement.

Meanwhile, At ESWT High, the digital environment of the Esports program often replicates broader societal gender biases. However, it also presents unique opportunities for challenging these norms. For example, the engagement of female students in digital design and coding initiatives highlights the empowering potential of digital spaces when they are structured to be inclusive and equitable.

Finding 3: Navigation of Identity and Participation within Esports

This section explores how female students at ESWT High navigate both their identity and participation within the Esports program, emphasizing the interplay between how they see themselves and their engagement in competitive and collaborative activities.

Interview Insights

Interviews with female students at ESWT High revealed the complex ways in which they navigate both their identity and participation within the Esports program. These students shared how the male-dominated environment often placed pressure on them to conform to aggressive gaming styles that did not align with their self-perception. One female student on the varsity Esports team explained, “The competitive atmosphere is tough, and there’s a real pressure to conform to the aggressive styles that don’t really represent how I want to play.” Such explanation highlights a recurring theme: the conflict between how female students perceive their identity and how the Esports environment pushes them toward behaviors traditionally coded as masculine.

In addition to the pressures of identity, female students also discussed the barriers to participation, particularly in competitive gaming sessions. One student noted, “In competitions, I feel like I have to prove myself twice as hard. The boys don’t seem to realize how much space they take up, and sometimes my ideas get overlooked or drowned out.” This sentiment was echoed by several participants who expressed feeling hesitant to fully engage in the competitive atmosphere, where male students often dominated the conversation and gameplay strategies. However, female students were more comfortable participating in non-competitive or collaborative settings. Another student shared, “In coding or design sessions, I feel more comfortable contributing, because it’s more about creativity and skills, not about proving who’s the best.” This contrast illustrates how participation levels were influenced by the type of Esports activity—students felt more engaged and confident in environments where collaboration was prioritized over competition.

The digital realm also provided a mixed experience for female students. While some felt marginalized in competitive online spaces, others found solace in digital communities within the school’s Esports network. Research shows that digital platforms can act as safe spaces for marginalized groups, providing opportunities for negotiation of identity and empowerment. As Van den Brink and Benschop (2014) explain, such spaces allow for recalibration and mutual support, particularly in male-dominated fields, fostering resilience and professional identity development among underrepresented groups. One student reflected, “There’s definitely a mix of good and bad online, but finding a supportive community within our school’s digital platforms has been a game-changer.” This supportive digital space enabled female students to connect with

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others who shared their experiences, fostering a sense of belonging. Jenkins (2009) similarly suggests that these online environments often suspend traditional norms in favor of more fluid interactions, while Daniels (2016) highlights the potential of digital platforms to foster inclusive communities, offering female students a place to assert both their identity and participation.

Ultimately, these interviews shed light on the intertwined relationship between identity and participation for female students in the Esports program. While their identity often clashed with the competitive aspects of the program, collaborative environments and supportive networks provided spaces where both identity and participation could flourish.

Observational Insights

Observations conducted at ESWT High provided a vivid picture of how female students navigate both their identity and participation within the Esports program. These insights revealed that female students often found themselves less visible in competitive Esports environments, particularly during varsity team practice sessions. During these sessions, male students frequently dominated both gameplay and strategic discussions. In one instance, a female student attempted to suggest a new tactic during a match, only to be overshadowed by louder male voices. This hesitation to assert ideas in competitive settings was a recurring theme, reflecting the identity struggle faced by female students in these male-dominated spaces. However, in non-competitive and collaborative settings, female students were observed to be far more confident and engaged. For example, during a coding and design workshop, female students took on leadership roles, with one student leading a group presentation on redesigning game characters to promote gender fluidity. The atmosphere in these collaborative environments was markedly different, with peers engaging in constructive discussions and valuing each other's input equally, regardless of gender. This suggests that female students feel more empowered to express their identity in spaces where creativity and skill are prioritized over competition.

Mentorship also played a critical role in how female students navigated their participation and identity within the program. Observational data showed that female students were more actively engaged when supported by mentors, particularly during collaborative projects. One female student shared that "Having a mentor who understands the challenges I face is really helpful," and this support translated into increased participation, especially in non-competitive Esports activities. Mentorship provided a sense of validation, allowing students to feel more comfortable expressing their ideas and participating in a meaningful way. As Ramaswami et al. (2010) argue, mentorship creates a safe zone for female students, empowering them to negotiate their identity and enhance their engagement in male-dominated spaces. In addition, female students were observed forming informal networks and gaming clubs as safe spaces where they could freely express themselves and play without the judgment often associated with competitive gaming environments. These informal communities provided students with opportunities to navigate their participation in a more supportive setting, fostering both their identity and engagement. One student commented, "We started a gaming group, and it's been a safe space to just be ourselves and play without judgment," illustrating how these informal networks helped female students build confidence in their participation and self-expression.

Challenges related to technology access also surfaced during observations. Female students often expressed discomfort when using high-end gaming equipment, with one student mentioning, "Getting used to the high-end rigs was a bit intimidating at first. I didn't have that kind of setup at home like some of the guys did." This disparity in prior exposure to technology created an initial barrier to participation, which may have contributed to lower confidence levels

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in competitive settings. However, with time and mentorship, many female students were observed to overcome this initial discomfort and become more engaged participants in the Esports program.

Theoretical Integration

The intertwined experiences of identity and participation for female students at ESWT High can be understood through the lenses of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) and Digital Feminism. These theoretical frameworks shed light on how educational structures, social dynamics, and technological tools within Esports influence both how female students perceive themselves and how they engage within the program.

Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). CHAT helps explain how the tools, rules, and community norms within the Esports program shape the identity and participation of female students. The tools of Esports—particularly gaming equipment and digital platforms—were initially perceived as barriers by many female students. As one student noted, “Getting used to the high-end rigs was a bit intimidating at first,” suggesting that unequal access to advanced technology outside of school created an early disadvantage for female students, impacting both their confidence and participation levels. CHAT emphasizes how such tools mediate learning and engagement, and here, the disparity in prior exposure to gaming technology underscores the gendered access to tools.

The community norms within competitive gaming also played a significant role in shaping female students' identities and participation. The competitive aspects of Esports, often characterized by aggressive play styles, were perceived as incompatible with how some female students viewed themselves. This tension between identity and the competitive environment aligns with CHAT's emphasis on how cultural and community norms influence participation in activity systems. In this case, traditional gaming norms—often masculine in nature—created pressure for female students to conform, inhibiting both their identity expression and full participation in these spaces. However, in collaborative environments, where community norms were more inclusive, female students were observed taking on leadership roles, suggesting that alternative community structures fostered greater engagement and empowered these students to express themselves more fully.

The school's mentorship program also aligns with CHAT's emphasis on the division of labor and rules that structure activities. Mentorship provided a crucial form of scaffolding, allowing female students to gain confidence, navigate their identity, and participate more actively. This reflects how institutional rules—such as establishing formal support structures—can promote inclusivity, allowing marginalized groups to thrive in traditionally male-dominated spaces. Through mentorship, female students not only became more engaged in Esports activities but also found the confidence to challenge existing gender norms within the community.

Digital Feminism. Digital Feminism provides a critical lens to understand how female students' identity and participation are negotiated within digital spaces. The digital realm, while replicating some of the societal biases present in physical Esports environments, also offered female students opportunities to build supportive communities and express their identities in ways that challenge traditional gender roles. As Ramaswami et al. (2010) explains, digital platforms can serve as crucial sites of negotiation and recalibration for marginalized groups, offering spaces where traditional norms can be suspended, and more fluid interactions can emerge. For female students at ESWT High, digital platforms—such as the school's Esports Discord group—created a community of support that was critical for both their identity

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formation and their participation. “Finding a supportive community within our school’s digital platforms has been a game-changer,” one student remarked, illustrating how these digital spaces provided a refuge from the pressures of competitive Esports and allowed for more meaningful engagement.

Furthermore, Digital Feminism highlights the ways in which female students created their own spaces within the broader Esports community, using digital tools to form informal networks and gaming clubs where they could participate without the judgment or marginalization often present in male-dominated competitive environments. Such observation aligns with Daniels’ (2009, 2018) argument that digital spaces can foster inclusive communities that challenge the exclusionary practices common in traditional gaming. These informal networks empowered female students to assert their identity and engage in Esports on their own terms, suggesting that digital spaces, when structured inclusively, have the potential to counteract the gendered barriers present in competitive gaming.

Overall, the integration of CHAT and Digital Feminism underscores the importance of educational structures, mentorship, and digital platforms in shaping both identity and participation for female students in Esports. These frameworks reveal the complexities of how female students navigate their roles within a traditionally male-dominated space, showing that inclusive structures and supportive communities can foster both greater participation and stronger expressions of identity.

Discussion

This study at ESWT High has revealed nuanced insights into the gender dynamics within its Esports program, highlighting both challenges and opportunities for fostering gender equity. Drawing from interviews, observations, and document analysis, the findings illustrate the complex ways educational structures, cultural norms, and individual agency influence female students’ experiences in Esports. The discussion that follows is organized into three key sections. First, the findings are interpreted through the dual lenses of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) and Digital Feminism to deepen theoretical understanding. Second, the study’s practical implications are outlined, including actionable strategies in areas such as technology access, curriculum design, and mentorship. Third, directions for future research are proposed to extend the study’s impact and examine broader applications across contexts. This structure offers both conceptual clarity and practical relevance, framing the study’s contributions to gender equity in Esports education.

Integration of Theoretical Perspectives

The competitive nature of Esports, often seen as a domain dominated by aggressive and masculine behaviors, presents barriers to female participation. However, the school’s efforts to integrate more collaborative elements into the curriculum, such as coding and design, demonstrate how changing the tools and rules of engagement can create more equitable environments. These changes align with CHAT’s emphasis on the transformative potential of redesigning activity systems to promote learning and inclusion. Meanwhile, the findings suggest that when female students engage in digital spaces that value creativity and technical skills over competitive prowess, they experience greater empowerment and belonging. This shift challenges traditional gender roles and supports the creation of a digital culture that is more inclusive. The

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positive impact of mentorship programs and supportive networks further underscores the potential for digital platforms to serve as spaces of resistance against gender norms.

Practical Implications

In light of these findings, this section outlines several key implications for practice, including strategies to improve technology access, address cultural stereotypes, reform institutional practices, and strengthen mentorship and support networks within Esports education.

Technology Access and Familiarity

Female students have reported feeling intimidated by high-end gaming equipment, often due to less prior exposure compared to their male counterparts. Establish introductory sessions specifically designed to familiarize students with gaming technology. It is thus recommended that equal access to equipment be provided during non-school hours and that female students have the same opportunities to become comfortable with the technology.

Cultural Perceptions and Stereotypes

Despite efforts to integrate females into the Esports program, a strong cultural perception of gaming persists as a male-dominated field. Female students often feel isolated and must continuously prove their legitimacy within the program. Thus, it is recommended to implement awareness campaigns and workshops that educate students and staff about gender stereotypes in gaming. Institutions should also celebrate and publicize the achievements of female gamers both within and outside the school to normalize female participation in Esports.

Institutional Practices and Curriculum

Current curricular and extracurricular activities may inadvertently favor male students by emphasizing competitive aspects of gaming, which align with traditional masculine traits. Thus, it is recommended that the curriculum be redesigned to include a wider variety of gaming genres that appeal to diverse interests. Institutions should also incorporate more collaborative and strategic gaming elements that require different skills beyond fast reflexes and aggression.

Mentorship Programs

The existing mentorship program at ESWT High has been instrumental in helping female students gain confidence and visibility within the Esports community. To enhance the mentorship program, campuses could recruit more female mentors actively involved in the broader Esports industry. Regular mentor-mentee meetups that include career talks, skill-building workshops, and networking opportunities are also recommended.

Supportive Networks and Clubs

Female students have initiated clubs and networks that provide a supportive environment for sharing experiences and strategies. Campuses should officially recognize and fund these initiatives to ensure they have the resources necessary to expand and sustain their activities.

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Policymakers should also encourage cross-collaboration between clubs to foster a larger community of support and learning.

Policy and Enforcement

The school's anti-discrimination policies and codes of conduct are pivotal in creating a safer and more equitable environment. School leaders are recommended to conduct regular reviews of these policies to adapt to evolving needs. Implementing a transparent enforcement mechanism that encourages students to report issues without fear of repercussion is crucial.

Future Research

In conclusion, exploring gender dynamics within ESWT High's Esports program has highlighted significant opportunities for fostering environments that support all students, regardless of gender. By continuing to challenge traditional norms and implementing supportive educational practices, schools can play a crucial role in shaping the future of Esports and technology fields to be more inclusive and equitable. This study offers practical insights for schools looking to enhance their Esports programs. Further research is needed to explore the long-term impacts of inclusive educational practices in Esports on student outcomes, including academic performance, career development, and social integration. Additionally, comparative studies involving multiple schools or different regions could provide deeper insights into the effectiveness of various strategies for promoting gender equity in Esports.

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