New Zealand attitudes towards the emerging sport of Esports:

Content analysis of New Zealand public discourse on Esports

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Globally, esports is no longer a new activity due to the expansion of esports tournaments, university scholarships, large sponsorships, and well-documented growth in popularity. Despite the global growth, esports and esports research in New Zealand is in a preliminary phase, with a national sporting body for esports only being approved in 2016. This research sought to develop an understanding of the prominent conversations, attitudes, and discourse in New Zealand through analysing publicly available articles and documents written in New Zealand and by New Zealand authors. A qualitative content analysis method was chosen, focusing on a sentence-by-sentence coding methodology. It was found that esports is yet to be accepted in public discourse, with articles repeatedly using justification language to defend esports against stereotypes and criticisms. Sport was conversely not criticised for these same objections, despite many of the criticisms being challenges sport also faces. Sport continues to be upheld in public discourse in New Zealand as an inherent 'good' regardless of potential negative outcomes for participants, while esports is not provided the same benefit of social acceptance, confirming again the Great Sport Myth. Beyond comparisons to sport, it was found that esports faces similar criticisms to videogames, adding to the difficulty of esports finding full acceptance socially and politically. While the data gathering method was set to rule out irrelevant articles, it was not possible to fully separate videogame content from esports content. Future research could compare the videogame and esports discourses to determine whether the themes are the same, similar, or different. Other future research opportunities found include determining a clear picture of the demographics of New Zealand esports players and fans, as well as investigating the current and potential future locations of esports facilities in New Zealand.

Keywords: esports, content analysis, videogames, Newman, Coakley, Great Sport Myth

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

Esports is the evolution of the recreational pastime of videogaming, competing in skill-based tournaments against other players for the promise of a prize. While esports could be considered a new activity due to its increased mainstream popularity and financial opportunity in recent years, competitive videogaming has been an activity that has been participated in for decades (Wagner, 2006; Ramella-Zampa et al., 2022). While esports has existed and developed in varying forms for decades, it remains a highly contentious subject, particularly within parts of the sporting industry such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) who have yet to accept esports as an Olympic sport (Jenny et al., 2017). Even within academia the majority of literature focuses on whether esports can be classified as a sport, or not (Chiu et al., 2021). The term esports is challenging to define (Reitman et al., 2020), and the esports industry faces barriers for acceptance through non-acceptance as a sport as well as facing negative associations with videogames which also have struggled with social acceptance (Newman, 2008). This study is timely; the recent approval of the New Zealand Esports Federation (NZESF) as a sporting body in 2020 by Sport New Zealand generated public debates on esports which are occurring currently, and the increase in the volume of academic literature on esports has been exponential between 2019 and 2022 (Ramella-Zampa et al., 2022). Indeed, the mere mention of the word esports whether at a relaxed social party or an industry event, sparks fierce debate or demanding questions, without invitation, such as “convince me that esports is good” or “tell me why esports should or should not be in the Olympics.”

In the international context, the IOC has not yet accepted esports as an acceptable Olympic Sport under their current framework but is allowing large global esports tournaments to occur alongside the official Olympics programme (International Olympic Committee, 2021). Recommendation 9 within the IOC’s Olympic Agenda talks about “encourag[ing] the development of virtual sport and further engagement with video game communities.”

In the New Zealand context, Sport New Zealand began publishing information on esports for the first time in the ‘Fit for the Future’ work released in 2020 and 2021, which encompassed a large number of reports (Sport New Zealand, 2020). These reports outline a number of global and national trends affecting sport participation in New Zealand and potential future scenarios based on these trends. The trends identified included areas like climate change, Covid-19, and Māori world view, and a ‘think piece’ was created for each trend (Sport New Zealand, 2021). Esports was identified as a trend, and a ‘think piece’ was created

commenting on the trend. Esports is also noted several times in other sport participation documents within the 'Fit for the Future' reports.

The 'think piece' by Sport New Zealand discusses the global esports industry and notes some philosophical opposition to a lack of physical activity but does not explore the intersections or characteristics of videogames, esports and sports. The understanding of the history, concepts, and criticisms of videogames, esports and sports is not defined which makes it difficult to apply an understanding of a future state for esports in New Zealand. Understanding the history of both videogames and sport is critical to understanding the social dynamics that esports is both assigned by society and asserts onto videogames and sport. Chapters 2 and 3 explore the intersections, similarities, and differences of videogaming, esports and sport through a review of history, concepts, and literature. The literature review explores current esports, sports and videogame literature. While there is research existing on esports globally, and research on videogames in New Zealand, there has been less research undertaken on esports in New Zealand. Further, following a number of local news articles and reports on esports which appeared to provide discussion with little evidence, an opportunity was found to undertake exploratory research on the current esports environment in New Zealand including the public discourse on the subject of esports.

The aim of the research was to provide a foundational understanding of the current themes surrounding esports discussion in New Zealand and contribute to the early academic research on esports in New Zealand. Crucially, the objective of this research was to determine the prominent conversations, attitudes, and discourse on esports in New Zealand, and discuss their potential relevance to the sport and recreation industry in New Zealand.

In order to achieve the objectives outlined above, qualitative content analysis (Bengtsson, 2016) was chosen focusing on developing an understanding of the prominent conversations, attitudes, and discourse in New Zealand through analysing publicly available articles and documents written in New Zealand and by New Zealand authors.

Thesis Structure

This thesis begins by outlining the basic concepts and history of videogames, esports, and sports before presenting a review of literature on academic research on esports and related videogames and sports literature. The next section of the thesis describes the chosen research methods and presents the method of analysis undertaken which highlights the initial discourse topics through codes and outlines the themes found. The results section is split into three sections to present and analyse the major themes found:

justifying esports, health and well-being, and esports in New Zealand. Finally, the discussion outlines the contribution of this thesis to academia and future research opportunities.

Chapter 2 – History and Concepts

Introduction

The creation of esports is connected to the creation and culture of videogames, as the recreational pastime grew into amateur and then professional organised sport (Kerr, 2006; Poole, 2000; Wagner, 2006). Society's perception, acceptance, and understanding of esports may be duly influenced by the history and concepts surrounding the emergence of initially, videogames, and subsequently esports. Additionally, the introduction of the activity both claiming sport status and directly using the word sport within the coined term has generated fierce debate within the traditional sport community (Wagner, 2006). The historical context of sport provides a foundation to understand academic commentary on esports, particularly from sport social scientists. Therefore, developing an in-depth understanding of esports requires an understanding of the history and concepts of all three related activities, videogames, esports, and sports.

Videogame History and Concepts

Videogames have a rich history full of anecdotes and heroes and remains a popular global recreational activity outside of esports. It remains so rooted within its own history and rituals that videogaming culture has its own distinct social practices (Seo & Jung, 2016) and can be studied within ethnology (Thornham, 2011). As Newman states, "there is more to videogaming than the blips of light on the screen" (2008). The identity of the first videogame remains debated (Herz, 1997) Games which are chosen as potential first videogames include Spacewar! (1961), Tennis for Two (1958), or the more primitive OXO (Noughts and Crosses) in 1952 (Juul, 2003; Rough, 2018; Bartel, 2018; Kerr, 2006; Herz, 1997; Poole, 2000). The real 'start date' appears to depend on the definition of 'videogame' chosen by the one dictating the history (Kerr, 2006). Regardless of the exact date chosen, videogames were notably invented at the same time as other

technology advancements such as the post-war development of computers and space exploration (Kerr, 2006).

Compared to other modern sports like skateboarding or surfing which began as activities outside of the business world, videogames were commercial products very early in their establishment (Wagner, 2006). Commercially, the first two games were launched around the same time in 1972, tennis and hockey games on the Magnavox Odyssey console and the arcade game *Pong* (Poole, 2000). The inventor of *Pong* formed the company Atari when the game launched which was a US company (Kerr, 2006). While the US has a strong videogame development history, one country that embraced gaming early on as mainstream culture was Japan. Nintendo and Sega are Japanese companies that started exporting arcade games in 1981 (Herz, 1997). Videogames may have been more successful in Japan initially due to the popularity of manga and animated films, which made videogames more socially accepted (Aoyama and Izushi, 2003). Esports was also more successful initially within Asian countries, such as Korea, mimicking historical videogame trends (Wagner, 2006).

Videogames as a concept have been compared to many cultural products. There is a significant body of literature devoted to comparing videogames to art (Jurgensen, 2018; Gaut, 2010; Tavinor 2009; Lopes, 2010; Smuts, 2005; Newman, 2008) while others compare videogames to sport, which is discussed further within the literature review. There is a body of academic research which discusses at length whether videogames conclusively include stories and narratives (Rough, 2018; Silcox, 2018; Kania, 2018; Robson and Meskin, 2016; Tavinor, 2009; Juul, 2001; Simons, 2007; Newman, 2008). Others view videogames as 'games' first, following the lead of Frasca who coined the term 'ludology', taken from the Latin: Ludere, 'to play'. Kerr (2006) notes that these two perspectives are now accommodated together in the study of videogames.

Rough (2018) outlines a number of philosophical reflections on what elements are essential to videogames and claims that "videogames are not (always) games" (p.27), "videogames are not (always) video" (p.33), "videogames are not (always) narrative" (p.35), and "videogames are not (always) fictions" (p.36). He argues that videogames are not always using video technology specifically, noting that many use vector displays and contemporary digital displays which are distinct different from raster scan technology (video technology). For example, *Asteroids* (1979), used a vector display. This is an important point – technology has evolved and will continue to evolve. Does the type of display technology, device, screen, or game accessories define the 'videogame'? It is clear that it does not, and rarely ever has, even from early games (Rough, 2018). Tavinor's definition of a videogame is open-ended enough to encompass the wide variety of videogame types that have emerged and continue to be created. Tavinor (2008) argues that:

> *X is a videogame if it is an artefact in a digital visual medium, is intended primarily as an object of entertainment, and is intended to provide such entertainment through the employment of one or both of the following modes of engagement: rule-bound gameplay or interactive fiction. (p. 11)*

Tavinor's definition does not constrict videogames to a 'game' or a competition, nor does it demand a fictional element, nor does it demand the strict definition of video, nor does it require a narrative. Where Bernard Suits (2006) provided a definition of 'game' which is cited often that can encompass a number of game types, Tavinor provides a videogame definition which also provides a broad foundation for the many types of videogames.

Esport History and Concepts

While esports has been described as a recent or sudden phenomena (Ramella-Zampa et al., 2022), playing videogames competitively began around the time videogames were created. The well-known *Spacewar!* Tournament was held at Stanford University in 1972, and Atari held many *Space Invaders* competitions in the 1980s across the United States in places like New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco (Wagner, 2006). These tournaments continued to be popular, with the introduction of first-person shooter PC games like *Doom*, released in 1996, becoming popular for many videogame competitions and LAN (local area network) parties in the UK and America (Wagner, 2006). LAN parties consist of players bringing their PC and equipment to one location, which allowed for games to be played in a shared location together, but on separate devices instead of being crowded around a single arcade machine or PC. The original LAN parties were enabled by public access to affordable PCs which began in the 1990s and still exist today (Swalwell, 2003). By the 2000s, due to technological advances, one thousand or more participants would turn up to LAN events (Jansz & Martens, 2005) as a way for gamers to socialise as well as play cooperatively (Swalwell, 2003). Indeed, a study of a LAN party in Norway found that the participants played three to four hours during the day and spent the rest of the time socialising (Nordli, 2004).

Following the popularity of LAN parties, The 'Cyberathlete Professional League' (CPL) was formed in 1997 and was modelled after the major professional sports leagues in the United States and considered competitive videogaming a spectator sport (Wagner, 2006). This marks one of the first applications of videogame tournaments naming themselves as a part of the sporting world as cyberathletes (Wagner, 2006). Two important further developments would occur two years later in 1999, the term 'esports' was used for

the first time and *Counter-Strike*, a first-person shooter PC game, was launched and would go on to be one of the world's most popular esports games (Scholz, 2019; Wagner, 2006).

While videogame competitors and tournament organisations started the term 'esports' in 1999, the evolution of videogames into a potential competitive sport can be better attributed to the gradual improvement to digital infrastructure that allowed for new experiences such as improved internet speeds allowing for faster and more reliable online game play (Hardenstein, 2017; Jenny et al., 2018). First, it was the introduction of and the availability of cheap personal computers (PC) and the introduction of PC games that drove the evolution of competitive video gaming (Haddon, 1993; Cornford et al., 2000). The improvement of internet speeds and connections worldwide then enabled the increase in videogames with cooperative team play and social interactions (Kerr, 2006; Wagner, 2006, Swalwell, 2003). Fast, reliable internet allowed for many gamers to play the game simultaneously, which created whole game genres dedicated to 'massively multiplayer online games' (MMO) and 'massively multiplayer online role playing games' (MMORPG) (Wagner, 2006). MMO and MMORPG are online videogames where thousands of players can play the same game together, and at any time (Thorne, 2022). Following the popularity of MMO, multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) was introduced in the 2010s which combined several popular elements: small teams playing against each other (5v5), strategy, and role-playing games (RPGs) (British Esports Association, 2016). Combined with streaming, these games can be played, watched, bet on, socialised within, and monetized; similar to sport (Reitman et al., 2020).

Now, with technology enhancements creating the ability to stream the games live globally, the development of sport governance organisations, and the introduction of paid players, betting, and advertising, academics have compared the similarities between competitive videogame play and globally organised sport (Reitman et al., 2020). These competitive tournaments and players have embraced the name chosen in 1999: Esports (Jenny et al., 2017; Wagner, 2006). The activity and term esports can now be found with traditional institutions such as university curriculums or as a connected team to professional sports leagues like European football leagues (Bertschy, 2019). The world of esports has now evolved to have so many characteristics of sport that the Olympic Agenda has a specific recommendation around virtual games and connecting with videogame communities (International Olympic Committee, 2021).

Despite the large growth in popularity and industry economic growth (Seo, 2013), the activity and term 'esports' remains ill-defined (Ramella-Zampa, 2022; Reitman et al., 2020). Reitman et al. (2020) note that the broadly accepted description of esports is competitive gaming, although this definition falls short of providing a complete definition of the activity. 'Competitive videogaming' as a definition does not address the similarities or differences from either videogames or sport (Reitman et al., 2020), rather continuing to place

esports in limbo between these two spaces by not providing a holistic and complete definition. Commentary from amateur and professional journalists agreed on the spelling of esports in 2017 with the updated Associated Press Stylebook (Academy, 2021) but Jenny et al. (2016) noted that academic literature has not agreed on a spelling of the term.[1] Most academic definitions remain inconsistent, leaning on a particular aspect of esports for defining assistance such as institutional infrastructure, popularity, the formation of teams, team communications, prizes and payment, or competing teams (Ramella-Zampa, 2022; Reitman et al., 2020). These aspects, leaned upon for defining esports, parallel traditional sport and esports (Reitman et al., 2020); consequently, the definition requires a position on the sports status of esports. Academic commentary has discussed and debated the inclusion of esports as a sport, both in the affirmative and in the negative, showcasing similarities (Bartel, 2018; Hilvoorde & Pot, 2016; Jenny et al., 2017) or declaring their differences (Parry, 2019; Hallmann & Giel, 2018). The position taken by Reitman et al. (2020) is that esports are "defined as games, as sport, or as mass entertainment. These definitions are not mutually exclusive but stem from different frameworks for understanding esports". Since Reitman views esports as a cross section of sport, entertainment, and games, it is understandable that their preferred expanded definition by N. Taylor (2016) encompasses these factors:

> *E-sports involves the enactment of video games as spectator-driven sport, carried out through promotional activities; broadcasting infrastructures; the socioeconomic organization of teams, tournaments, and leagues; and the embodied performances of players themselves. (p.115)*

While this aptly describes some esports tournaments, esports has also been used as a term to describe the online cycling game Zwift (Thorne, 2022). Zwift is a digital cycling game, adapting the sport of cycling to enable game play in a digital world against other athletes online (Thorne, 2022; Westmattelmann et al., 2021). Zwift is a digital adaptation of cycling (Westmattelmann et al., 2021) rather than a competitive adaptation of videogames, which Hilvoorde & Pot (2016) call 'virtual sports' and specifically remove from their discussion of esports, seeing them as a different category. Hamari and Sjoblom (2016) positively position esports as a sport more directly than Taylor, which enables a broader range of esport types to be included. Hamari and Sjoblom describe esports as "a form of sports where the primary aspects of the sport are facilitated by electronic systems; the input of players and team as well as the output of the esports system are mediated by human-computer interfaces" (p. 213). Therefore, depending on the definition utilised or the data collected, the research of esports can consider a broad range of people and elements,

[1] 'Esports', as a pluralised noun, is currently the preferred term as it dominates popular use. The use of esports as a plural form rather than singular (esport) can lead to grammatical infelicites. Neither popular culture nor academic literature have agreed a consistent grammatical use of 'esports' or 'esport', therefore the popular use of 'esports' has been adopted for this study.

encompassing many activities which are played competitively with some form of electronic or digital element.

Sport History and Concepts

To understand and discuss the current social discourse and academic research of esports, the historical context of sport is critical because the initial creation and development of the sport industry impacts on the perception of esports as an activity that is accepted within the sporting world. Sport history has an enduring literature, with many scholars dedicating their time to pen the history and impacts of sport (Collins, 2013; Coakley et al., 2011; Crotty and Hess, 2016). However, it is important to note that literature often focuses on the European emergence of sport and does not focus on other global examples including indigenous sport and games (Coakley et al., 2011). This may impact on an academic understanding of how sport, as viewed by non-European countries, has impacted on the current social discourse, and understanding of esports both in non-European countries and European countries (Coakley et al., 2011).

Despite a focus on European sport history, it is well documented that sport has an enduring historical connection with war (Coakley et al., 2011; Collins, 2013). Sport has been quoted as assisting schoolboys in Britain get ready for the military, even though this is not necessarily a proven fact (Ryan, 2016). Other connections to war include the physical games from Ancient Greece, the Roman Empire which were 'warrior sports' like chariot racing, wrestling, javelin throwing (Coakley et al., 2011). Many Olympic sports continue to include games played at Olympia thousands of years ago. The pentathlon includes shooting, riding, fencing, running, and swimming which are all useful for military training (Crotty and Hess, 2016). The first pentathlon is suggested to include three military officers. In fact, the connection between playing sport to prepare for war was so prevalent that some argued that those who did not enlist did not earn the right to play sport in a post-war world following the end of the Great War (Ryan, 2016).

The concept of amateurism in sport was developed from the British Amateur Sport Ideal and was a feature of sport from the late 1800s to the 1970s (Lumpkin, 2016). Amateurism, in the case of sport, perceives a person who plays a sport for the 'love of the game' and does not receive monetary benefits as the ideal sportsperson (Lumpkin, 2016). Receiving monetary benefits from a sport, or even spending endless hours training as if the sport was a professional job, were seen as immoral or suspicious (Riordan, 2006). The Olympic Games continued to hold an idealistic requirement of amateurism for athletes into the 1970s, and this requirement for participating in the games no longer exists (Osborne & Wagg, 2017). However, the impact of idealistic amateurism remains an influencer for the Olympics and the global sport industry

(Osborne & Wagg, 2017), and sport continues to claim its place as a morally 'good' activity, which builds the morals and character of its participants (Coakley et al., 2011; Frey & Eitzen, 1991; Collins, 2013).

Modern sports include some of the elements of historic sport but with notable differences. Allen Guttmann (1978) argues modern sports, distinguished as dominant sports forms (DSFs) include seven specific characteristics that other periods of time did not include in the same fashion, or at all. These characteristics are secularism, equality, specialisation, rationalisation, bureaucratisation, quantification, and records. Many historical sports included some form of religion or ritual, where modern sport is devoid of religion. Today's DSFs also encourage participation from all (equality), commitment to or excellence at a particular sport (specialisation), and particular rules around participation and training methods (rationalisation). Modern DSFs are also governed by complex organisations (bureaucratisation), include precise timings (quantification), and focus on setting and breaking different types of records, whether personal or world records (records). Despite Guttman's thorough research on sport characteristics, the debate on what constitutes a sport still remains for many activities such as chess (Kobiela, 2018).

Chapter 3 – Literature Review

Introduction

In an age filled with digital media, videogames are increasingly becoming integrated into daily modern life. While the definition of a videogame, a video, a game, or the difference between a game and a videogame can be debated at length (Bartel, 2018; Juul, 2005; Rough, 2018; Tavinor, 2008), and an agreed academic definition of esports is yet to occur (Reitman et al., 2020; Jin, 2010), market data companies like NewZoo, academics and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) alike agree that video gaming and esports continue to grow rapidly in participation and industry value (Jin, 2010; Peng et al., 2020; NewZoo, 2021; International Olympic Committee, 2020). Despite these groups agreeing that esports is growing in global importance, esports has been a recipient of a wide range criticisms for both claiming sport status (Parry, 2019) and its perceived impact on its participants (Kerr, 2006, Sport New Zealand, 2020; Ramella-Zampa, 2022).

This is multiplied by the fact that while there is research on videogames, research on esports is still emerging and growing rapidly (Kerr, 2006; Reitman et al., 2020). Indeed, Kerr (2006) notes that there was a lack of independent statistics and few large-scale studies, and while this review of literature has found that research is growing for esports, this literature review found that there are gaps remaining. Videogame research became an organised discipline in 2003, with the founding of the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA), while esports research is more recent with the earliest literature with esports as a topic being published by Bryce and Rutter in 2002 (Reitman et al., 2020). Therefore the difference between videogames and esports and their respective public perceptions are also still emerging. Current research which includes commentary on the public perception of esports is completed across a number of disciplines including social science, sports science, media studies, business, informatics, law, and cognitive science (Reitman et al., 2020). Reitman et al. (2020) found that current esports research is primarily naturalistic

observation which is focused on exploratory and descriptive work, excluding experimentation methods that could be implemented following exploratory esports research. Reitman et al. (2020) also found that a common trend in research across all disciplines was the discussion of the similarities and differences of sport and esports. Since the research objectives of this work focus on public perception, attitudes, and discourses towards esports, the literature review discusses common discourses, support and criticisms surrounding esports, contrasted against literature which discusses any similar discourse surrounding sport or videogames.

One of the most heavily examined aspects of esports is how it fits into to the already well-established culture and industry of global sport. While the focus of this research is not to argue or compare whether esports should or should not be classified as a sport, the debate is a key feature of esports literature and impacts on public perception of esports by analysing every angle of esports from its impact on young people (Williams, 2002) or the motivations of players (Seo, 2016).

Is Esports a sport?

A central discussion within literature on esports questions the legitimacy of esports to be classified as a sport. Esports has received criticism from sporting organisations, like the IOC, as well as academics (Sport New Zealand, 2020; Chung et al., 2019, Parry, 2019) which has impacted on its ability to be viewed as legitimate by the wider public. While they may be different activities, the criticism of esports is similar to videogames. Kerr notes that, for many, videogames are "mystifying, challenging and to varying degrees, viewed as dangerous" (2006, p. 3). These attitudes are sometimes featured in the arguments as to the inability of esports to be classified as a sport. As previously noted, this debate on the sport status of esports is a key part of the esports literature which goes on to discuss the perceived benefits or negative impacts of esports versus sports.

There are many authors who argue to classify esports as a sport for varying reasons (Filchenko, 2018; Hallmann & Giel, 2018; Hamari & Sjoblom, 2017; Jonassson & Thiborg, 2010; McCutcheon et al., 2017; Wagner, 2006; Witkowski, 2012). Many arguments focus on the physical aspect of sport as the key to determining if esport can be deemed a sport (Hilvoorde, 2016; Holt, 2016; Parry, 2019). Wikowski (2012) conducted a literature analysis which found that physicality was the necessary condition that defines sports. Hilvoorde (2016) argued that esports should be compared to other confirmed sports like darts, which itself has a contested history as a sport, often instead being seen as a recreational activity (Hilwoorde, 2016; Witkowski, 2012). Others argue that the fine motor skills required for esports confirms its place in the

sporting world (Holt, 2016; Jonasson and Thiborg, 2010, Hallmann & Giel, 2018; Jenny et al., 2017), while Parry (2019) argued that gross motor physical skill is required for a game to be classified as a sport. Arguments for classifying esports as a sport also include the attitudes or motivations involved when esports is played, such as acquiring knowledge, escapism, and athlete aggressiveness (Hamari, 2017) or the player requirements like practice, dedication, concentration, and critical thinking (Railsback, 2019). Through surveys at esports events, both Railsback (2019) and Hamari (2017) conclude that the motivations of esports players are comparable to athletes, and therefore esports can be classified as a sport. Hallmann & Giel (2018) came to a similar conclusion that the similar attitudes of players proved esports as a sport, finding that both professional athletes and esports players see their activity as neither recreation nor work – but something in between. Another argument is that structured competitions, teams, and facilities required to deliver esport competitions are what classify an esport as a sport (Hamari, 2017). Some academics argue that esports is a separate phenomenon to sport, and the competitions and facilities showcase videogames with "sportification" which is superficial, and therefore they remain non-sport (Lopez-Gonzalez & Griffiths, 2016). Other academics argue strongly for esports to be included within sport management (Funk et al., 2018).

Regardless of the ongoing debate, esports has received a form of external validation from the IOC through their launch of an esports competition alongside the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, however, it is still not an Olympic sport (International Olympic Committee, 2021). Its inclusion has caused some sporting organisations to question their stance on classifying esports as a sport or to re-align themselves to the Olympic Committee's direction, see for example Sport New Zealand and Sport England (Sport New Zealand, 2021; British Esports Association; 2019).

Criticism of Videogames and Esports

Videogaming and esports are not the same activity; however, the criticisms of these activities are similar, if not the same, which creates the opportunity to consider literature that discusses public perception of videogames in media. Videogames have experienced wide criticism in public discourse and media (Frasca, 2003; Newman, 2008; Kerr, 2006; Williams, 2002). Newman (2008) devotes an entire chapter to the public chastising of videogames called 'Everybody hates videogames' which describes a number of dominant ideas about videogames that are found within media. In his chapter, he focuses on two main narratives seen as pervasive in media: violence in videogames and the cause of social, cultural, and educational decline in adolescents. These criticisms are then separated into four categories of on-going criticism: sociality,

creativity, productivity, and literacy. Both the two main narratives and four categories presented by Newman reflect dominant perceptions of esports as well.

The below expands on Newman's narratives and categories, outlining the criticisms or negative outcomes found in literature on both videogames and esports: addiction and mental health (Sim et al., 2012; Billieux et al., 2019; Lopez-Fernandez et al., 2019; Ramella-Zampa et al., 2022) poor health outcomes (Williams, 2002; Arnaez, 2018); negative impact on young people (Williams, 2002; Paaßen et al., 2017; Newman, 2008); and violence (Newman, 2008; Frasca, 2003). It also notes any alternative perspectives on these criticisms and sport literature which features discussion of similar negative outcomes in sport. While these are popular criticisms, these are not the only criticisms of videogames and esports. Sexism is another criticism of esports, both within the games themselves and the treatment of female athletes (Williams, 2002; Kerr, 2006). With the increase of esports being a spectator form of entertainment as well, gambling, cheating and other diplomacy issues found also in sport are present in esports (Murray et al., 2020; Scelles et al., 2021).

Addiction and Mental Health

It is asserted by both academics and media that both videogames and esports have the potential to create gaming addicts. Videogames are not the only technology criticised for causing mental health disorders and addiction; there is a list of nine criteria based on the DSM-5 (5th addition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) criteria for 'internet addiction' as well as 'internet gaming addiction' (Sim et al., 2012; Ramella-Zampa et al., 2022). Despite the acceptance of potential addiction to all technology, problematic play specifically within videogames is a recent addition in 2013. Research on addiction to videogames has been investigated primarily through self-reporting questionnaires and 'Gaming Disorder' has only recently been classified in 2018 (Billieux et al., 2019). Therefore, the rates reported on problematic play are not consistent (between 0.4% and 34%) and there is current no agreement on the prevalence of gaming addiction (Paaßen et al., 2017; Lopez-Fernandez et al., 2019). Further, there is some concern that patterns of high involvement in gaming that are non-pathological may be exaggerated and lead to overdiagnosis (Billieux et al., 2019). This is referred to as the *Confirmatory Approach* where potentially excessive behaviours like working, studying, or dancing are conceptualised as genuine addictions rather than a part of another conceptualisation like obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), impulse-control disorder, or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (Billieux et al., 2019). By utilising terms like gaming disorder, there is a potential for other co-morbid diagnoses to be overlooked which may be more relevant to excessive behaviours (Han et al., 2010). Self-reporting questionnaires focus on the behaviour which may place the blame of addiction on the activity itself instead of considering other factors (Billieux et al., 2019).

While sport is more accepted in modern society than videogames historically have been, sport has also been attributed with facilitating addiction to exercise as well as other mental health disorders including body dysphoria, anorexia athletica, and eating disorders (Paaßen et al., 2017; Anderson and White, 2017; Coakley et al., 2011, Bär & Markser, 2013), chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) which affects approximately 20% of retired boxers (Iverson et al., 2004), substance abuse of alcohol, drugs and performance enhancing drugs (de Grace et al., 2017) and exercise addiction (Bär & Markser, 2013, Billieux et al., 2019; Landolfi, 2013; Godoy-Izquierdo et al., 2021). Overtraining syndrome is also an issue for athletes, which, like videogame or internet addiction, can be conceptualised in terms of disorders such as OCD or depression. Overtraining syndrome symptoms include fatigue, insomnia, appetite change, weight loss, a lack of motivation and concentration difficulties (Armstrong & VanHeest, 2002). A person with exercise addiction will continue exercising regardless of physical injury or disruption to other areas of their life (Landolfi, 2013). While exercise addiction can be attributed to fitness, one study found that the difference in exercise addiction prevalence between a fitness group and a football team was statistically insignificant and could indicate that the addiction is just as prevalent amidst team sports (Lichtenstein et al., 2014).

A key criticism of videogaming and esports is the potential to develop an addiction (Ramella-Zampa et al., 2022; Anderson et al., 2010; Macey & Hamari, 2018; Hussain et al., 2015). Literature also discusses the potential for addiction and mental health disorders within sport both at amateur and elite levels (Di Lodovico et al., 2019). Therefore, criticisms on the potential risk for addiction and mental health disorders exist across all of sport, videogames and esports.

Poor Health Outcomes

The stereotype of a gamer has been likened to “isolated, pale-skinned teenage boys [sitting] hunched forward on a sofa in some dark basement space, obsessively mashing buttons” which infers a physically inactive, antisocial personna (Paaßen et al., 2017). The connection between gaming and physical activity is not agreed, with research finding differing conclusions. While Ballard et al. (2009) found a negative correlation between frequency of game play and physical activity, Arnaez et al. (2018) found that as weekend game time increased, fulfilling physical activity recommendations decreased. Interestingly, the same study found that players who played competitive tabletop games as their main game, like board games, were more likely to not meet physical activity guidelines than self-identified computer game players (Arnaez et al., 2018). The inclusion of competitive tabletop games within the research of Arnaez et al. highlights an issue with determining the connection between gaming and physical activity; it is difficult to compare research directly when the parameters of what constitutes gaming, esports, and videogames are not constant between studies. Since the research on physical activity and gaming is not conclusive, it is not surprising that while increased screen time has been linked to a higher Body Mass Index (BMI), the link between obesity and

videogaming has not been strongly established (Trotter et al.,2020; Marker et al., 2019). While videogame popularity and obesity rise have occurred along similar timelines, the casual relationship of the two have been researched with mixed results including small correlation and no correlation (Marker et al., 2019). Therefore, it is difficult to determine if the correlation between videogames and poor health is as strong as the stereotype claims.

While poor health outcomes from video game play are stated by concerned sports organisations for young people (Sport New Zealand, 2021), there are many studies that have shown videogames can be a positive part of older adult health (Lee, 2019; Hall, et al., 2012; Broeren et al., 2008; Basak et al., 2008; Studenski et al, 2010; Brem et al, 2010; Hsieh et al, 2018; Peretz et al., 2011, Torres, 2011; Kuys et al., 2011, Williams et al., 2011; Bainbridge et al., 2011; Yamaguchi et al., 2011; Szturm et al., 2011). Playing online games for older adults was found to increase social connectedness and social capital, and those who played games were found to report higher civic engagement (Lee, 2019). Research on poor health outcomes for esports players is limited compared to the available information on video gamers. One piece of esports research does show that esports players are average weight, with a small group of significantly obese players (Trotter et al., 2020). Players ranked in the top 10% were more physically active than the bottom 90%, and esports players were more likely to be non-smokers and non-drinkers than the general population (Trotter et al., 2020).

Sport organisations often focus on the positive characteristics of their chosen activity by promoting their contribution to the general population's physical activity (Sport New Zealand, 2020) which has been claimed as a positive aspect of sport as early as the 1800s (Collins, 2013). However, there are many critiques of sport and its negative impact on health (Anderson and White, 2017) This includes liver damage and heart disease from drinking, injuries and the 'female athletic triad' (eating disorder, amenorrhea, osteoporosis). Other criticisms include debilitating sport injuries like torn ACLs and concussions (Anderson and White, 2017; Coakley, 2015). Regardless of these critiques, sport is viewed by the media as a force for social good (Coakley, 2015). The Great Sport Myth (GSM) was developed by Coakley reviews this cultural acceptance in detail and describes the way that the positive perceptions of sport continue to dominate despite evidence that there are negative consequences to the activity (Coakley, 2015).

Harmful Effects on Young People

A study by Paaßen et al. (2017) found gamers were perceived as unpopular, unattractive, idle, and asocial. However, as a part of the same study, when gamers and non-gamers then self-assessed against the stereotyped attributes, no significant difference was found between the gamers and non-gamers (Kowert, 2012). It is noted that the 'gamer' definition is this study was very broad which could have affected outcomes

(Paaßen et al., 2017). The answer to whether videogames *cause* negative outcomes for young people remains therefore unanswered within literature and is rather discussed. Chiu et al. (2021) found that esports literature focused more on the 'dark' side of esports, noting the consistent discussion of harm to teenagers and young people including game addiction and gambling; they called for more research to focus on exploring the potential benefits of esports. The finding from Chiu et al. (2021) substantiates the claims from other academics that esports and videogames are perceived as a negative activity for young people (Paaßen et al., 2017; Kowert, 2012; Newman, 2008). Newman (2008) outlines four critiques of videogames within public discourse and media which are outlined below: sociality, creativity, productivity, and literacy.

Newman (2008) outlines that videogames are seen as a thoughtless activity where the player becomes reclusive and isolated . He also notes that the stereotype of a young videogame player is not merely seen as socially withdrawn *because* of playing solitary games, but that videogames *caused* the player to be social inept. Newman (2008) argues that positive uses for videogames are under researched and at a basic level, research does not take into account aspects of videogaming like discussion, sharing hints, creating strategies and playing together. He argues that the key reason videogames are such an engrossing activity is because they are interactive – not mind numbing as is suggested by critics. Indeed, it was found that with games played in living rooms, in LAN parties, or online, that players cited that the social aspect was the main reason for coming together (Swalwell, 2006; Jansz and Martens, 2005).

Sport is also cited as a way to 'build character' in adolescents (Coakley et al., 2011). However, not all academics and social researchers would agree with this claim (Coakley, 2015; Anderson and White, 2017). A 2007 survey showed sport as a main cause of injury in adolescents (Abernathy & Bleakey, 2007). Further, it is argued that players are pressured to take on a creed of 'giving it all', sacrificing relationships, desires, work and physical health for their team and sport (Anderson and White, 2017). Certainly, there is an acknowledgement of the pressure placed on young people both physically and mentally to achieve in sport, causing burnout and injury. Sport organisations like Sport England and Sport New Zealand have acknowledged these issues and have made changes like removing competitive elements of sport for players under 12.

Creativity is defined by Sternberg and Lubart (1999) as the ability to create or produce work which is both *novel* and *appropriate* use for the situation, which is broadly aligned with a Kantian view on how genius requires a valuable feature as well (Meskin, 2018) and it is argued that videogames are publicly perceived to provide no opportunity for creativity (Newman, 2008). Videogame players are seen as repeating the same actions, undertaking no effort, work, or strategy in the playing of the game. This lack of creativity, and inferred lack of variety or effort, can be contrasted with the celebrated athletes who, it is argued, use creativity to deploy a new plan of attack such as footballer Zinedine. Zindane who could quickly find an

unmarked team member, who had been marked a second before (Memmert et al., 2010). This is termed *tactical creativity* in ball sports as a way to describe the flexible decision making within complex game play and is highly desirable for coaches and trainers (Memmert, 2007; Memmert et al., 2010). Creativity within sports discourse is common, and a systematic narrative review carried out by Fardilha and Allen (2019) shows the sport academic and industry interest in developing the creativity of athletes which has been developed over 51 years, partially fuelled by the advent of performance analysis.

Despite a larger body of research on the ability for sport game play to include creativity, Zhong et al. (2022) found that the frequently used game mechanism of a quest within MMOGs required imagination, creativity, planning, argumentation and adaptation to different viewpoints which is seen as a key skill within the 21st centaury workplace. Further, while the creativity involved in esports game play has yet to be compared with tactical creativity as defined by sport, creativity and originality was found to increase in participants after playing action videogames (Yeh, 2015). The ability to make predictions of upcoming game events, both temporally and spatially, have an impact on subsequent creativity performance as they contribute to attentional breadth which is used in creativity literature (Yeh, 2015; Green and Bavelier 2006; Spence and Feng, 2010). However Meskin (2018) warns in his review of Yeh's study (2015) and two others that there are problems with this creativity and videogames research. He critiques the limited nature of focusing on a single cause (playing an action videogame) to result in increased creativity. He argues that the connection is too weak, focuses on discrete efforts at a point in time, and criticises the measurements used by Yeh to account for creativity in the study participant (Meskin, 2018). While Meskin (2018) is not convinced that research proves videogames increase or decrease creativity in a person, he does argue that most popular videogames involve difficult problem solving which requires creativity within videogame play.

Newman notes that the lack of effort and creativity is linked to the criticism that videogames are a 'colossal waste of time' (Newman, 2008: 13). Videogames are seen as 'mindless' activities which hold the attention of the player, who could be undertaking a more 'enriching' activity. Newman's discussion on videogame criticism finishes on the discussion of videogames versus books, noting a letter to the *Daily Telegraph* by British Prime Minister Boris Johnson accusing videogames of replacing books to the detriment of young people. These negative perceptions are not the ideals for young people as described in sport literature (Coakley et al., 2011). In a plea to parents to discourage videogames, young video gamer players have been described by Boris Johnson as 'blinking lizards' (2006). In this comparison, the gamer has even ceased to be human, as a lizard. In contrast, sport players are described in the media as assertive, hardworking, and obedient (Coakley et al., 2011).

Violence

The inclusion of violence within videogames is a topic which has been thoroughly researched with a particular interest from academics and general public on any correlation between violence-themed videogames and post play violent behaviour. However, there are inconsistences in empirical data tying gameplay to violent post play behaviour (Newman, 2008; Anderson et al., 2007; Durkin and Aisbett, 1999; Griffiths, 1999; Harris, 2001; Unsworth and Ward, 2001). Even without confirmation of the correlation through evidence, violence themes in videogames may be problematic for their status as sports and institutionalised acceptance.

Sport has notable 'real life' physical violence that is not currently mirrored within esports. Even online videogames that include physical activity like *Zwift,* a cycling app used for online cycling races, are non-contact in nature. While esports do feature violence in first person shooter (FPS) games which include digitised killing, they do not have contact sports injuries like concussions, broken bones, and brain damage, which have a very real impact on an athlete's quality of life (Anderson and White, 2017). In order for the public to accept the violence and injury involved in sport, Simon (2014) argues that sport is transformed through competition and enables violence to be regarded as morally 'good'. Examples of violence which is excused through game play might include punching a person until they are unconscious in boxing, the funding of rugby despite the high rate of concussions or allowing depictions of murder in a videogame. The impact of violence on those involved is ignored by society at large, to continue playing a game (Simon, 2014). Some sports philosophers have explained this transformation from actions being seen as violent to being accepted by focusing on consent as a key transformational element to turn violence into sport. Weimer (2012) argues that it is the consent given by each player who agrees to play the sport that converts the violent act of fighting into the sport of boxing. He rejects others (McAleer, 2009; J. S. Russell, 2004, 2007) who deem consent incapable of generating this conversion and gives consent a primary role in the transformation of violence to game play. Conversely, Simon (2014) does not see a need for conversion. Competition, he argues, is already the cooperative aid which assists the other team or players in their quest for excellence at the sport. It is a social contract that all competitors enter voluntarily; it is not spoken, but it is known (Simon, 2014).

Within videogames studies, Nguyen expands and critiques the 'cooperation and consent' discussion from Weimer (2012) and Simon (2014) by layering the Suitsian gaming definition to these sport philosophers' arguments. (Nguyen, 2017; Nguyen 2018). Nguyen (2017) argues that the moral transformation occurs across several features like player motivation, game structure, game design, social features and institutional features. In a significant departure from Weimer (2012) and Simon (2014), Nguyen argues that the moral

transformation within violent videogames is due to the *internal motivation* or *state* in which the players play the game (2018). Nguyen outlines two motivations in particular: achievement play and striving play. He argues that an achievement player focuses solely on winning, whereas striving player focuses also on the subordinate goals that comprise the game's objectives, seeking to develop skills (Suits, 2006). He argues that if a player's motivation is only to win, and violence ensues, moral transformation of the violence has not taken place and the violence is not warranted. However, if the player is a striving player and the violence aids them in their quest for a stronger body, or a quicker reaction time, the violence has transformed to being 'good', and the player is benefiting from it (Nguyen, 2018). Nguyen noted that these games are 'capable of converting aggression into a social benefit and perhaps even a moral good' (Nguyen, 2017, para. 1).

In literature, videogames and sports both wrestle with their connection to violent behaviour and seek to instead advertise their 'social benefit' and 'moral good'. The moral transformation, as demonstrated through the literature of both games' philosophy and sport philosophy, occurs in both activities – one on a screen, and one on the field.

New Zealand Research and Esports

Since the term was coined, esports has evolved over the past two decades as a global economic powerhouse akin to other professional sports leagues (Ramella-Zampa et al., 2022). However in New Zealand, esports has only recently been accepted as a sport by Sport New Zealand with the acceptance of the NZESF as the national sporting body in 2020, allowing the introduction of legal betting on esports (Sport New Zealand, 2020). While there are recent industry documents, such as the Futures reports from Sport New Zealand which note the emergence of esports in New Zealand (Sport New Zealand, 2020) the research on esports in New Zealand is still emerging (Reitman et al., 2020).

New Zealand research on esports focuses primarily on the esports athletes. Yuri Seo is a notable academic who researches esports athletes in New Zealand. His research includes surveys of New Zealand esports athletes and asks questions about well-being, player motivation, and identity (Seo, 2016). Further, he considers esports culture through the eyes of the athlete, analysing survey responses and player discourse in the media (Seo, 2014). Seo has also investigated videogame and esport consumption (2019). These surveys add new information to the research pool on esports athletes, and provide understanding around motivation, barriers, and career progression (Figure 2). Other research on New Zealand esports athletes investigate skills and motor-abilities in New Zealand esports players (Pluss et al., 2021, 2019; Lam et al., 2020). One study focused on privacy for athletes gaining golf coaching through video (Bacic et al., 2017). There are

international academic articles which note elements of the New Zealand national sport governance structure, and the NZESF national sporting body approval from Sport NZ or New Zealand law and policy, but do not discuss the New Zealand esports industry further (Cunningham et al., 2018; Chambers, 2020; Murray et al., 2020; Üçüncüoğlu & Çavuşoğlu, 2020). A meta-review of esports research was completed in Australia in 2021, which noted the key elements covered by literature as physiological health impacts, mental health, psychological and social impacts. Again, the focus of this meta-research is not in New Zealand and is primarily on the player or athlete outcomes and not on wider society attitude and discourse. There has been some esports research outside of the focus on esports athletes in marketing and business in New Zealand which assess the financial opportunities of esports (Mahoney & Tang, 2021; PwC, 2016).

There is no academic research currently that takes a wider view to explore the attitudes and perceptions of esports in New Zealand, to ascertain the potential relevance or application to the future of NZ sport and recreation industry. Research on this topic would be vitally useful to sporting organisations looking at their adaption to this change, and to understand the literature surrounding the connected but separate spheres of videogames, esports, and sport.

Conclusion

While competitive videogaming has been around for decades (Wagner, 2006), new technology has created the opportunity for playing videogames competitively to share similar characteristics to sports (Seo, 2013; Üçüncüoğlu & Çavuşoğlu, 2020). Now in 2021, organisations like the Olympic Committee are considering the inclusion of esports within their competitions, whether alongside or within the Olympics (International Olympic Committee, 2021).

Sport New Zealand has only begun to attempt understanding and future strategy around esports in recent reports, and there is limited research in New Zealand around esports. While there is research around the attitudes towards videogames, types of videogames, ‘esports vs sports’, and mainstream media’s reporting of videogames, there is not research which undertakes analysis on the New Zealand current attitudes and understanding of esports. With the approval from Sport New Zealand of the NZESF as a national sporting body in 2020, it is an opportune time to undertake a discourse analysis of mainstream media’s reporting and public documents on esports to consider the prominent conversations, attitudes, and discourse on esports and its relevancy to the sport and recreation industry within New Zealand.

Chapter 4 - Methods

Research Methods

A key aim of this research was to explore and understand the current attitudes, conversations, and discourses about esports in New Zealand. Content analysis is a type of analysis within academic research that focuses on analysing text or visual data (Berelson, 1952; Krippendorff, 2019; Findahl and Hoijer, 1985; Catanzaro, 1988; Downe-Wamboldt, 1992; Burnard, 1991; Burnard 1996; Polit and Hungler, 1999). Downe-Wambolt (1992) describes content analysis as a "systematic and objective means to make valid inferences from verbal, visual or written data in order to describe and quantify specific phenomena" (p. 314). While content analysis can be applied to the recorded words of interviewees or survey information, the method drawn upon for this research focused on existing written data found in publicly available documents and media to determine public perceptions and attitudes towards esports. The data analysis method chosen for this research aligns with the latent analysis method shown in Figure 3 from Bengtsson (2016) and was influenced by methods of other media context analysis methods (Guzman et al., 2021).

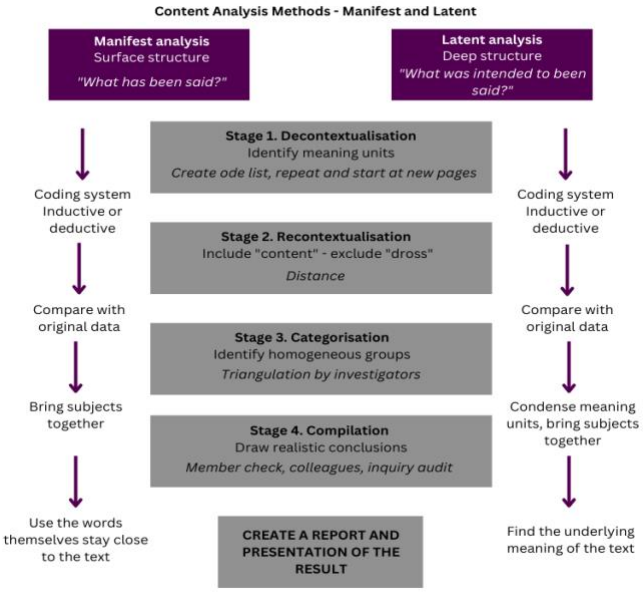

Figure 3: Adapted from "An overview of the process of a qualitative content analysis from planning to presentation" (Bengtsson, 2016, p. 9, used under Creative Commons Attribution by Non-Commercial No-Derivs License).

Method of Analysis

Table 1: Content Analysis Method Utilised

Pre-Analysis	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4
Meaning unit	Condensed meaning unit	Code	Category	Theme
Data Collection	Decontextualisation	Decontextualisation & Recontextualisation	Categorisation	Compilation
A sentence from a news article.	Short description of text, close to text words.	Condensed meaning unit which interprets what is being said.	Type of discussion category	Wider theme or meaning.

The method of content analysis had four stages and was heavily influenced by the latent analysis method from Bengstsson (2016) and Graneheim & Lundman (2004). These guiding methodologies noted that there are two key choices within content analysis to be made prior to the data collection and analysis. The first choice is whether the analysis will employ deductive or inductive reasoning (Bengstsson, 2016). Inductive reasoning is the "process of developing conclusions from collected data by weaving together new information into theories" (Bengstsson, 2016, p. 10), such as reviewing sentences without an intended end point or end themes. Conversely, deductive reasoning utilises the opposite approach by beginning with a hypothesis or set of parameters and reviewing the content with this pre-determined lens. The conducted research was exploratory in nature due to the lack of academic literature and research in New Zealand on esports; further, the aim of the research was wide without a specific hypothesis. Therefore, the methodology chosen was inductive – without a set of proposed meaning units prior to analysis. The meaning units were determined through a set series of analysis within four stages as described below. Secondly, Graneheim & Lundman (2004) note that there is a fundamental decision to be made prior to data collection and analysis which is whether to utilise 'manifest analysis' or 'latent analysis'. Manifest analysis focuses on stating the exact words said and reporting findings which remain close to the text, while latent analysis attempts to

interpret the intent of the sentence, finding the underlying meaning through condensed themes. The analysis chosen was a latent analysis, which focuses on attempting to interpret the intent of the sentence, rather than simply stating what was said (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004). Table 1 outlines the methodology completed with examples, reading left to right.

Selection of Search Parameters

This research examined news articles and public documents to understand the current attitudes and discourses on esports in New Zealand. By utilising existing content, the study highlights the current content and discourse that is occurring in the public domain rather than generating additional content through surveys, allowing for more descriptive statistical detail around the topics and tone of the writing (Baroutsis, 2021). The data collected represents the publicly available information on esports through media, public websites, documents and reports; it does not include individual discussion on social media. Media sources have an ability to influence and shape attitudes and beliefs towards a particular issue or person, in some cases directly affecting people's central ideas and beliefs (Baroutsis, 2021; Ellis et al., 2019). This research seeks to understand the discourse which is both publicly available and easily accessible for mass public understanding, rather than being limited to particular groups. Gaining access to social media commentary on particular group sites such as Discord or Facebook required approval from site administrators. If access had been granted by only a few site administrators, this may have skewed the data collected toward one particular interest group. Further, the public does not have access to all social media pages. However, there could be merit in a focus on social media if more time was available such as the Reddit 'r/nzgaming' and other Discord servers for New Zealand gaming discourse. The aim of this research is focused on providing an exploratory understanding of the predominant attitudes and discourses within the New Zealand public on esports, to determine any broad themes which may influence public opinion. Therefore, the methodology focused on the use of recent, previously published news articles and publicly available documents.

It was chosen to review articles which were written between dates ranged from 2010 to 2022 to ensure reporting on current attitudes and perceptions of esports aligned with the aims of the research. The number of articles on esports spiked significantly within this time period, and the time period captured the articles which preceded and succeeded the decision from Sport New Zealand for Esports to become a national sport, providing a volume of public commentary large enough to undertake content analysis. This research focused specifically on attitudes and discourse on esports in New Zealand which resulted in exclusion of articles which were published by countries outside of New Zealand, without any mention of New Zealand esports. However,

due care was taken to ensure articles about global esports written by New Zealand journalists and commentators were included.

Method of Data Collection

A number of online search engines were used to collect articles and publicly available documents. Initial searches included utilising the following websites: Google, Sport New Zealand website, New Zealand Esports Federation website, Skills Active New Zealand website, Recreation Aotearoa website, Newztext Plus database, and Factiva Database. Initial Google searches returned over 13 million results between 2010 and 2021, however, articles became irrelevant after reviewing the first 150 item in the search result. Articles which were being hosted on potentially relevant websites prompted a further search for articles and mentions on the relevant website. This included: esportsinsider.com, talkesport.com, velocitynews.co.nz, esportsobserver.com, renews.co.nz and geekzone.co.nz.

Search terms within large databases or search engines included 'New Zealand AND esports', 'New Zealand AND esports AND negative impact', 'New Zealand AND esports AND positive impact'. Other searches included adding words found within the literature review, for example 'physical activity', 'physical inactivity', 'community', 'violence' and 'recreation'. Searches within individual websites included 'videogames', 'esports', 'New Zealand' and 'e-sports'. The searches and methods were documented throughout the process to ensure a consistent approach to collating articles and determining relevance against the research objectives and pre-determined search parameters.

Table 2: Search results from method and number of articles reviewed to determine inclusion within next stage

Website	Number of results returned	Articles reviewed for research inclusion
Google	13,000,000+	150
Esports Insider	90	90
Talk Esport	40	40
Geek Zone	112	112

Velocity News	20	20
Whangārei Esports Facebook Page – Linked to article	1	1
Esports Observer	62	62
Sport New Zealand	2	2
Skills Active New Zealand	50	50
Recreation Aotearoa	0	0
Newztext Plus Database	903	140
Factiva	933	933
Total	**13,002,213+**	**1,600**

Articles were briefly reviewed to determine relevance against the research objectives and pre-determined methodology and the reasons for excluding articles were documented to ensure consistency of decision making. Reasons for exclusion included that the article was written outside of New Zealand and did not mention New Zealand esports, the article only stated the date of an upcoming esports tournament with no other commentary, or the article mentioned the name of a New Zealand esports player with no other commentary. Publications and articles that only focused on videogames without any reference to esports were also excluded. The total number of documents and articles coded were 301. The documents and articles were filed in three ways: using NCapture for Chrome to file PDFs of the website into a computer folder, importing these PDFs into NVivo, and documenting the reference within a specific folder in Zotero. NVivo (Version 12), a qualitative insights analysis tool, was used for storing and managing data as well as the coding and analysis. The contents of the documents and articles were then coded within NVivo.

Method of Analysis

Overview

The four stages of content analysis used were decontextualisation, recontextualisation, categorisation, and compilation (Bengstsson, 2016). The analysis was undertaken on the software NVivo – a qualitative analysis software that enables coding of sentences within discourse or content, and then developing categories and themes for comparison and analysis. Bengstsson's approach is to repeat stages in a cyclical format, with articles, sentences, and codes receiving many revisions to arrive at appropriate code structures, themes, and results ensuring a reduction potential bias or researcher fatigue in the coding process. The methodology followed this cyclical format by reviewing the initial documents twice within data collection first, and then cycling three times through coding, categorisation, creation of parent and sub-parent categories, and re-coding.

Data Collection Analysis

In practice, the first review was undertaken within the data collection described above which sorted the search results into relevant articles for collection and further analysis. The first review of each article was only brief, to ascertain the relevance of the article against the research methods, for example if the article was written about esports in New Zealand. Although this process was within the data collection phase and pre-analysis, the review of each article did represent the first time each article was analysed for inclusion in the research and resulted in 301 articles being moved to NVivo for coding and analysis. A second review of articles occurred prior to the first stage of analysis, decontextualization, and was completed within NVivo. Articles were coded by colour initially, identifying duplicate articles (18) or articles without any relevant sentences (2) which resulted in 281 articles being moved into the first stage of content analysis – decontextualisation.

Decontextualisation

As Bengstsson (2016) outlines, the first stage includes creating codes for each sentence, where the first codes are meaning units and outline what is being communicated without an interpretation of the meaning being identified. Therefore, the first analysis of articles included a sentence-by-sentence review of articles, creating 'nodes' about the theme or words within the sentence about esports. This was undertaken without seeking to understand the intent of the author or writer but rather focusing on what was being communicated first, purposefully coding without a set structure to allow for themes to emerge organically. The application of coding this way, taking sentences at face value for the use of positive or negative words

towards esports or esports players, included both negative and positive sentiments to remove coding bias by the researcher. Regardless of the intent of the author to ultimately relay esports in a positive or negative light within the entire article, the comments were coded on a sentence-by-sentence basis. It was found that sentences often crossed multiple ideas and therefore one sentence may have received several codes depending on what was being communicated. Aligned with the cyclical approach to content analysis, the coding within this stage was completed on the first 20 articles and recontextualisation and categorisation was investigated and evaluated before re-review the first 20 articles and re-reviewing the rest of the articles.

Recontextualisation

This stage focuses on checking that all aspects of the content have been covered according to the aim of this research (Burnard, 1991), and the removal of unnecessary 'dross', or extraneous sentences that are not needed for analysis. This stage was completed both within the initial data collection and second review of articles, while sentences which were not relevant were left uncoded to keep them from being included within analysis.

Categorisation

Following the coding of 20 articles, an assessment of any categories emerging was undertaken to determine if there were any ideas or concepts which should be grouped together. It was clear at this stage that there were 'positive' and 'negative' comments about esports, as well as about videogames where the two concepts were combined. Therefore, most codes were grouped into positive and negative parent categories with a few 'neutral' exceptions.

- Positive
    - Comments on the positive outcomes of esports (eg. social collaboration)
- Neutral
    - Comments which are neither positive or negative (eg. Covid-19)
- Negative
    - Comments on the negative outcomes of esports (eg. social isolation)

The remaining articles were coded with the 'positive', 'negative' and 'neutral' code groupings despite new codes being added as new code ideas were presented, as they always fit into these categories and therefore no new coding groups were introduced after this point. Although categorisation can include sub-headings or sub-themes, it is recommended that no code should fall between two groups or fit into more than one group (Krippendorff, 2004). Therefore, the method followed only selected one category within each parent category – positive, neutral and negative. Again, this process of coding and reviewing parent

categories or sub-categories is recommended to be repeated and was repeated many times throughout the coding process. There remained an openness throughout the coding process to find other parent categories or themes which expanded beyond the positive, neutral, and negative parent categories; however, the sentences reviewed remained in this structure throughout coding and categorisation. Therefore, the themes found within coding were easily grouped into three distinct categories: positive (33 codes), neutral (8 codes), and negative (32 codes) which are listed in Table 3.

Table 3: List of Positive, Neutral and Negative Codes

Positive	***Neutral***	***Negative***
• Accessibility • Cognitive boost • Communication • Competitive • Creativity • Difficulty-Skilled • Discipline • Diversity and Inclusion • Economy • Education and schools • Esports as Sport • Esports as viable career • Esports as viable recreation choice • Fans and fan engagement • Fun • Get outdoors • Good for children/young people • Growth-Growing • Healthy • Innovation • Leadership skills • NSP connect to sports • Number of hours training • Older age • Physical activity • Popularity • Professional events equipment • Regulations-Structure • Respect-sportsmanship • Safe online	• Acceptance of videogames in society • Covid-19 • Demographics of gaming NZ • Esports Facilities NZ • Esports IS NOT • Future of Sports • History of gaming esports • Unsure sentiment athlete-esport as sport	• Inaccessibility • Advertising • Bad for children/young people • Difficult to become esports pro • Diversity and inclusion • Doping-cheating • Esports as videogames • Esports not a sport • Expensive • Gambling • Gaming Addiction • Unhealthy • In-app purchasing • In-game purchases loot boxes • Indoors activity • Mature or concerning content • Money focused not sport values • Moral Objection • Not as popular in NZ • Not long enough no strategy • NZ unsupportive of esports • Physical Inactivity • Lack of Regulation - Structure • Replacing traditional sports • Safety online • Server location or internet • Smoking • Social isolation • Too much time spent playing • Unskilled/thoughtless activity • Violence

• Self-Confidence • Social Collaboration • Violence makes it a sport		• Waste of time

Neutral Codes

It was determined that articles simply stating upcoming tournaments, or the results of a tournament would fall within a neutral stance because they provided no other information or discussion on esports than event information. This created a neutral category for codes for themes and discussions which did not fall within positive or negative sentiments and did not appear to fit into another logical parent category. The codes that were decided to be within the neutral category included demographics of esports players, the mention of Covid-19, the mention of where esports was being played (code: Esports Facilities NZ), and discussion on the history of gaming or esports.

Table 4: Number of References - Neutral Codes

Neutral Codes	Number of References
Demographics of Gaming	174
Unsure Sentiment athlete-esport as a sport	168
Future of Sports	157
Esports Facilities NZ	153
Covid-19	110
Esports IS NOT	71
Acceptance of videogames in society	57
History of gaming and esports	31

Demographic descriptions were coded as neutral because these descriptions are stating a statistic or fact, with large variances between descriptions and coding these sentences in positive or negative would be too presumptive on the author's opinion. The most common neutral code used was the demographics of gaming with many articles describing the age, gender, socioeconomic status, and even body type of the person being interviewed or profiled. Other articles stated research or data on typical age ranges for videogame or esports players which were deemed to be neutral comments on statistics found by the author. Following demographics, the 'unsure sentiment' code is used to capture a sentence where the writer displays some form of hesitation to either call esports a 'sport' or an esports player an 'athlete'. The sentiment of the sentence was deemed to be hesitant and questioning of esports, and therefore did not fit within either outright positive or outright negative categories. The 'Future of Sports' includes occurrences of the writer

claiming that esports will be the sport of the future, which was coded as neutral because no positive or negative statement was made towards esports; rather, the sentence states esports as included within the future of sports as an observed reality without stating that this is a positive or negative future.

Positive Codes

The positive codes category captured sentences that claimed esports had positive impacts or outcomes. The 'Esports as a Sport' code was very generic and was used to capture sentences where it was asserted that esports is a sport and therefore was a positive activity. This code was not useful for determining the reasons why esports was being affirmed as a sport. Therefore, the codes outlined below other than 'Esports as a Sport' note the key positive attributes claimed by esports articles and documents, which were captured within the positive parent category.

The 'Social Collaboration' code incorporated sentences which highlighted the social connection opportunities available through playing esports, for example one website stating that they were "creating communities and friendships with technology" (Your Corps New Zealand, 2022). The Social Collaboration code also include references to teamwork or skills related to working well with others. A code was created for articles claiming that esports is a positive activity for children, youth, and young people called 'Good for children/young people'. This code captures all discussion on esports being positive for a broad range of young people, due to the variation of age ranges within these claims. Another frequently used code throughout articles was the 'Education and Schools' code which included discussions about esports being used in schools for education and training or for creating esports school leagues for students. The Education and Schools code was determined to be different to 'Good for children/young people' since the coded sentences focused on utilising videogames for training or teaching rather than the potential positive outcomes for adolescents, even though one sentence could cover both topics.

Table 5: Number of References - Positive Codes

Positive Codes	Number of References
Esports as Sport	655
Growth-Growing	442
Esports as viable career	404
Popularity	375
Economy	289
Social Collaboration	276
Education and Schools	254
Regulations-Structure	226

Good for children/young people	214
Healthy	200
Fan and fan engagement	188
Difficulty-Skilled	182
Cognitive Boost	158
Diversity and Inclusion	146
Esports as a viable recreation choice	133
Competitive	128
Fun	90
Discipline	88
Physical Activity	87
Number of Hours Training	80
Innovation	60
Communication	52
Self-Confidence	47
NSP connect to sports	44
Respect-sportsmanship	43
Professional events and equipment	41
Accessibility	37
Creativity	16
Good for older age	5
Leadership skills	14
Safe online	8
Get outdoors	1
Violence makes it a sport	1

Esports was noted many times as being a positive influencer for mental, emotional and physical health. The 'healthy' code was used to capture all comments about the positive influence of esports across the three areas while any positive commentary on social outcomes remained coded under 'Social Collaboration'. It was determined that it was unnecessary to create separate categories for the types of health as the claims were broad and lacked detail on the positive impact within each type of health negating the requirement for a separate code or further sub-categorisation.

The ‘regulation and structure’ code was incorporated to encompass discussions on currently occurring or improved structure of the sport noting international organisations, esports leagues rules and regulations, anti-doping programmes, agreed esports athlete principles and values, sponsorships, partnerships, and other professional organisation structures. A code was created to capture the sentences which discussed the ability for esports to have diverse player demographics and include those who may not fit in to traditional sport activities. Within the positive codes, ‘diversity and inclusion’ was used where the writer indicated esports provided inclusion for disabilities, gender, social skills, differing interests, personality types, and socioeconomic status.

Negative Codes

The ‘replacing traditional sports’ code captured sentences which either directly stated that playing esports would replace time spent playing traditional sports in society, or indirectly stated a takeover of sports by esports. Other chosen codes related to New Zealand specific comments, either about how the New Zealand public was unsupportive of esports (NZ unsupportive of esports) or asserting that the esports industry is too small in New Zealand to warrant discussion or affirmation as a sport (Not as popular in NZ).

The codes ‘gambling’, ‘In-game purchases loot boxes’ and ‘in-app purchases’ all point to comments made about the dangers of playing games that have gambling, or gambling-like, game play. ‘Loot boxes’ are often found in free or cheap games where the game developer makes their return by significantly restricting game play without the purchase of mystery boxes or in-game upgrades. The loot boxes that can be purchased often have their contents hidden until the purchase is made, which some believe triggers a similar response to gambling (Goodall, 2017). These codes note the discussion of these concerns.

Table 6: Number of References – Negative Codes

Negative Codes	Number of References
Replacing traditional sports	101
Not as popular in NZ	84
NZ unsupportive of esports	64
Lack of Regulation	55
Difficult to become an esports pro	50
Esports as videogames	49
Diversity and inclusion	48
Bad for children	46
Social isolation	37
Too much time spent playing	37

Waste of time	35
Gambling	31
Unhealthy	30
Physical Inactivity	30
Indoors	29
Violence	28
Unsafe online	27
Esports not a sport	23
Doping-cheating	22
In-game purchases loot boxes	18
Moral Objection	17
Expensive	16
Gaming Addiction	15
Inaccessible	14
Mature or concerning content	11
Server location or internet issues	11
Money focused, not sport values	7
Unskilled	7
Not long enough/no strategy	2
Advertising	1
In-app purchasing	1
Smoking	1

The Moral Objection code was used when the article discusses moral objection without specifying the objection, such as broadly stating that esports is against one's ethics. Specific moral objections were given their own codes, such as Violence. These codes, such as Gambling, were thought originally as being too closely related to morality to require their own code; however, comments were deemed to be too specific to be included within the 'moral objection' code and therefore it was decided to include a specific code for discussions about violence.

Another complex coding choice was for sentences that claim esports is Unhealthy. The code Indoors notes instances where esports or videogame players are described as being in basements, rooms, the dark, or never seeing the sun. This could be seen as a potential sentence for the Moral Objection code or the Unhealthy code, however it was decided to separate these comments as their own code within the

categorisation stage since there was not a comfortable fit into either alternative category. Therefore, the Unhealthy code was used to note references to esports having a negative impact on mental, emotional and physical health, including diet, mirroring the Healthy code found within the positive category.

Compilation

After the cyclical development of final codes and categories occurred as outlined above, a fourth and final review was undertaken to amalgamate duplicate codes, delete accidental duplicated coding, and ensure that new codes introduced through the process were not overlooked within the articles reviewed early in the process. Then, the codes within the positive, neutral, and negative categories were combined into overarching themes by reflecting on the codes within the category tables above as well as reflecting on the literature review as recommended by the latent analysis method (Bengstsson, 2016). Within the categories of positive, negative, and neutral, codes were moved into differing themes and reflected on until a logical assessment was arrived at based on both the coding process and literature. The ultimate result of this process was 16 defined themes (6 negative, 5 neutral, 5 positive) which could be analysed and then discussed.

Limitations

This research focuses on articles and documents written between 2010 and 2022. While competitive videogaming has been occurring for decades longer, the public discussion on esports in New Zealand has been more recent. Initial searches found that there were very limited numbers of articles using the word esports before 2014. Therefore, this research is limited to attitudes and discussions within 2010 and 2022 and does not represent historical attitudes, but it does address the key aim of the study which is to provide an understanding of the current public attitudes, perceptions, and discourse on esports in New Zealand. Further, as the commentary on esports in New Zealand is relatively new, many articles discuss attitudes towards both esports and videogames. While care was taken to remove articles which focused solely on the wider gaming industry and did not include any commentary on esports or competitive video gaming, some articles combined the discussion to both videogames and esports. This research will therefore include sentiments that reach across these areas.

There are a number of areas where discussions about themes in New Zealand are held which were not included within this research because the research sought to focus on publicly available content, acknowledging the large role that mass media plays, having the ability to influence central beliefs (Ellis et al., 2019). Social media websites such as Twitter, Facebook, Twitch or Discord were not included within the data

reviewed by this study. Gathering individual comments from social media groups would have required permission from community group administrators and the limited timeframes for a master's thesis prevented this option. Conversations on esports on different social platforms are not all publicly available which could have potentially skewed results toward a particular platform or social group. However, this remains a limitation of this research to fully capture the attitudes and discussion on esports within New Zealand.

Online videos were not able to be captured through the NCapture tool which may have reduced some commentary. However, videos delivered by news outlets were found to be provided in text which was captured. Other videos found only included discussion on Australian esports and were discounted. During the coding phase, a software issue resulted in the loss of codes and completed coding. The coding was re-completed utilising the documented methods and list of codes to ensure consistent re-coding. However, there is a chance that the re-coding process resulted in differences from the first coding and the second coding.

Chapter 5 - Results

Introduction

The themes found through the method of analysis provide an opportunity to analyse the current attitudes and discourse on esports in New Zealand. The neutral themes found were: Covid-19, Demographics of Esports and videogame players, Justification, Societal Acceptance of Gaming, and Esports Facilities. The positive themes found were: Economic Benefit & Professional Industry, Positive Personal Attributes, Inclusion and Diversity, Positive Impact on Young People, and Esports are Equal to Sport. The negative themes found were: Not Inclusive, Unhealthy, Unproductive, Moral Objections, Esports as a Threat to Traditional Sport, and Esports too small in New Zealand. These themes, across positive, negative and neutral sentiments are discussed together in three sections below. The first section discusses the justification language found in articles, defending esports. The second section discusses the codes and categories which debate esports, and health and wellbeing. The third section discusses codes that encompass esports in New Zealand across demographics, inclusion and diversity, esports facilities, and support for the esports industry and players.

Justifying Esports

Polarised views on Esports

A major finding of this research is the majority of articles discussing Esports in New Zealand are positioned to either defend Esports and discuss its positive attributes and outcomes or outline the potential negative attributes and outcomes for the reader. There is a distinct lack of other sentiments in the discussion of esports, with the discourses on esports being notably polarised and codes clearly falling into negative or positive sentiments. There were very few codes which were neutral in sentiment. This is significant as it demonstrates that there is a clear division in sentiment toward esports in New Zealand. The articles and documents defend or attack the concept or activity of esports at varying degrees of vigour. Interestingly, the positive attributes of esports were mentioned more in the reviewed articles than negative attributes. In some cases, the positive attributes mentioned quadrupled the number of mentions of negative attributes. Indeed, this is the first sign of the repeated justification of esports which is discussed further below. The top five mentioned positive codes were Esports as a Sport, Growth-Growing, Esports as a Viable Career, Popularity,

and Economy. The codes which note the global growth of esports, its popularity, its career pathways and its financial prowess demonstrate the key claim that esports is a legitimate sport because it is highly participated in and generates large economic benefit to players, investors, and their supporting nation. These codes are found in articles which claim the esports industry has experienced large growth, that it is popular with a large global following, and that esports is economically prosperous, offering a potential esports career as a player or within a related industry such as game development.

As noted within the methodology, sentences were coded against negative or positive categories based on the connotations of the words used, regardless of whether the comment was used ironically or to argue the opposite view. An example of an article which uses negative sentiment to argue the opposite view is seen in the repeated *justification* theme which starts with a stereotype (esports players are social outcasts) and subverts it (esports players are socially connected). This pattern was also used at times in the opposite way, beginning with positive attributes in order to argue the positive attributes are overstated or incorrect. In many cases, the views are so polarised that the truth about esports is simply not clear, which could cause confusion among the public. Further, it is also evidence that public attitudes toward esports are already conflicted and confused. For example, discussion on the impact of videogames and esports on real world violent activity is well-researched, but comments within articles provide conflicting viewpoints on their impact. A few articles note the research on videogames and violence being unrelated, such as:

> *"Studies consistently find that the "long-term impacts of violent games on youth aggression are near zero", they write. (Hern, 2020, para. 7)*

However, another article attaches a national tragedy to videogames and esports inferring a violent connection is present.

> *He said the Christchurch massacre had made popular shooter games like CounterStrike untenable for organisations like the Olympics, and other games were difficult for first-time viewers to understand. (Smith, 2020, para. 11)*

Conflicting views, and even conflicting facts or data, are present throughout the articles and documents reviewed across a variety of topics including mental health, career opportunities, and the demographics of players and fans. When discussing the possibility of esports being included within the Olympics, directly conflicting arguments about the nature of the Olympics and gaming are presented. For example, Olympics President Thomas Bach criticised esports for being too focused on generating revenue without the inherent value that the Olympic sports have, saying that "commercially driven" gaming was also compared unfavourably with "values-based" sports (Kinnear, 2019a, para. 34). Others disagree that esports does not have a value base, stating how esports allows young people to "use their love for video gaming to build

teamwork, sportsmanship, social connection…" (Letsplay.live, 2017, para. 4). A New Zealand Esports Federation board member further disagrees and is clear that the Olympics is absolutely revenue driven and is commercialized, which only justifies esports' place:

> *"Everyone has to be frank and honest about what the Olympics is," Mutu said. "The Olympics is a money-generating sporting venture as much as it is the pinnacle of certain sports" (Kinnear, 2019a, para. 44).*

These are examples of directly opposing quotes that occur across many of the themes found and demonstrate a division of understanding and attitudes towards esports in New Zealand. There are many arguments 'for' and 'against' esports which are discussed at length within esports articles and documents. The discourse does not appear to be settled on particular viewpoints or acceptance of esports within New Zealand society, but demonstrates combative language, justifications for inclusion or exclusion of esports as a recreational activity or sport and opposing viewpoints.

Repeated Justification of Esports

Particularly interesting was the discovery of a commonly occurring rhetorical feature in articles which was coded as 'Esports IS NOT'. This type of sentence often occurs at the beginning of the article and serves to name the negative stereotype that the writer envisions their audience would believe about esports and esports players. After naming the naming stereotype, the writer goes on to argue a positive attribute about esports or, indeed, positive personal attributes about esports players themselves.

[Description of negative attribute or stereotype]

+

[corrective language – however, but]

+

[positive attribute or revised truth]

The intention is to convince the reader that the negative stereotype is no longer, or was never, true. This rhetorical pattern was a significant feature of articles discussing esports as it was found occurring 71 times in the articles reviewed. The below quote provides an example of the use of the rhetorical structure.

> *"On the face of it, people are 'just' entertaining themselves. However, when you peel back the layers there is an industry ripe for accelerating the skills needed for Māori and Pasifika young people to thrive not just in the future, but now." (Udy, 2019, para. 4)*

The sentence above begins by noting a negative attribute about esports, stating that esports is 'just' entertainment and infers that the activity is a waste of time. Then, the author continues the rhetorical

structure pattern by employing the word 'however' and proceeding to directly address the negative attribute (waste of time) by introducing a contrasting positive attribute (career opportunities). The author utilises the rhetorical structure to argue that esports is good for the futures of young Māori and Pasifika and will accelerate the skills they need for a career. Another example of this rhetorical structure:

> *"People are still of the opinion that gamers are the nerds in the corner who have no social skills, doing something that won't take you anywhere in life. But this initiative is a step towards showing people that esports can lead to many opportunities in a billion-dollar industry." (University of Waikato, 2019a, para. 4)*

The sentence utilizes the rhetorical structure by first outlining two perceived undesirable personal characteristics of someone who plays videogames and esports. This is a person who is unpopular and struggles with social interaction, as well as someone who is wasting their time on an activity which is unskilled and unproductive. The author then uses corrective word, 'but', and makes a counterargument made against this preconception; it argues that esports is a large, successful industry that has career opportunities and is not a waste of time. Often, these justificatory comments seek to convince the reader that their pre-conceived notion about esports or videogames is incorrect. For example:

> *"Some people see gaming as an unproductive pastime. But the growing phenomenon is proving to be an undeniable force that can lead to careers in professional gaming, coding, and game development." (University of Waikato, 2019b, para. 1)*

The negative stereotype in this justification is that esports and videogame players are unproductive. The writer seeks to convince the reader that there are skills and job opportunities within gaming that make esports a productive pastime.

The need to justify esports as a legitimate sport or recreation activity was found throughout articles and did go beyond the repeated rhetorical structure found. Many articles refer to the esports players as gamers or even enthusiasts, steering clear of calling them players or athletes as we might expect as the term used by other sports for their participants. Other articles directly question the legitimacy of esports being viewed as a sport by utilising scare quotes,

> *"And just like the Breakers Academy, the Dojo is the training centre for some of New Zealand's best "athletes" in their field." (Kinnear, 2019b).*

The scare quotes here imply the understanding, perhaps shared by their readers, that gamers are not real athletes. Scare quotes are used for other words as well, to highlight the understanding that the author is not convinced of the legitimacy of esports. As one article notes, "esports events [draw] crowds comparable to

high-profile “proper” sports events” (Cotton, 2020, para. 13). Indeed, many articles employ the use of scare quotes as well as the words traditional, mainstream, and proper to describe sports which the writer deems to have been accepted in society.

The justifications of esports are more forthright in some articles, for example in the statement that “e-sports, accept it or otherwise, is here to stay” (Devlin, 2019, para. 1). Such comments are concretely focused on the future, where esports is an accepted sport and played at the Olympic Games, attempting to dismiss the need for justification or argument. One article states proudly,

> *“You might scoff at it, and that’s okay. This sport will outlive you and your generation. It will outlive me and my generation, and the one after mine.” (Brooks, 2018, para. 9).*

These comments are confident in their assessment that esports is the sport of the future whether you agree with its inclusion as a sport or not. The activity is booming and happening now, so there is no changing what is in motion. Articles also use past examples of cultural shifts to describe how esports will eventually become a mainstream activity, such as books, movies, rock music, and television (Digital New Zealand, 2018, pg. 3).

> *“Books were once lamented because it was feared that we would start relying on them, instead of building personalised wisdom. Esports and online gaming are part of the new frontier.” (Udy, 2019, para. 2).*

Although these comments are more confident and brash than other justifications, they remain justifying sentences. They focus on reasons, for example the numbers of viewers and popularity of esports, as justification that esports is too large of an industry to ignore and still seek to convince the reader why esports should be considered legitimate within sport and recreation. The justificatory language used through rhetorical structure or outright confident challenge demonstrates a challenge for all esports advocates – the need to argue for videogames and esports as a positive activity and a part of a healthy lifestyle is still required. Despite the number of negative comments being less frequent than positive comments in articles reviewed, articles commonly used defensive and justificatory discourse which suggests esports is not yet widely accepted as legitimate, both as a recreational pastime, and as a sport.

Comparing sports and esports

As discussed above, the defensive discourse often compares esports to sport, in many different ways, as a way of justifying its own existence within the sporting world. At times, this includes brashly challenging traditional sport, with one article noting,

> *"This isn't about esports wanting to become an Olympic sport, it's never been about that," said Mutu. "It's never been about esports participants wanting to go to the Olympics, this is about the Olympics needing esports." (Kinnear, 2019a)*

Indeed, the most commonly used code within the negative category was 'Replacing Traditional Sport', which encompassed concerned comments from sporting organisations that esports presented a threat as well as comments which claimed esports is taking over, or will take over, traditional sport. To be clear, this claim is a starkly different proposition than stating esports is a sport, the claim confidently asserts that esports will not only be equal to traditional sport, but it will be bigger and better than traditional sport. Articles employed provocative headlines which directly compared the sport of rugby, famously popular in New Zealand, to esports. Articles presented professional sports athletes who play esports to legitimise esports and provide another example of another way esports is integrating with rugby and traditional sport. These sentences suggest to the reader, "if esports is good enough for your favourite rugby player, why is it not good enough for your friend or child?" Radio New Zealand cites Aaron Smith as a rugby player who plays esports,

> *While All Blacks halfback Aaron Smith and other rugby stars take each other on via popular online football games like FIFA, established cyclists are using their lockdown time to stay fit and even continue to compete in their chosen sport. (Pulman, 2020, para. 2)*

Articles also proclaim that the "National eBlacks team [will] 'rival' success of All Blacks" (Steenkamp, 2018, para. 1) and that "no traditional sport can contend with the atmosphere, production and sheer excitement that comes with watching Esports live — not even rugby" (Kinnear, 2019c, para. 1).

In fact, some writers propose that esports tournaments trump traditional sport for excitement and infer that esports will replace traditional sport in the future. These claims of esports replacing traditional sport are not viewed positively within all articles, with one interviewed football president being quoted as saying that "the biggest competition to kids coming to our sports clubs is not handball or basketball but the use of digital equipment" (Kinnear, 2019c, para. 67). There are concerns within the articles reviewed that the competition from esports on traditional sport would affect the well-being of citizens and particularly young people. Sport New Zealand (2020, p. 34) intimates,

> *Arguably, of greater significance is the impact eSports will have on the discretionary leisure time of millennials, including time being physically active, and how it will challenge and disrupt traditional sport and recreation offerings.*

The comments from Sport New Zealand focus on the possible replacement of traditional sports with esports, treating esports as a new threat for other sports to compete against with for participants while also inferring that physical activity will suffer as a result. Further, it is also noted that esports betting may compete directly

with traditional sport inferring that future financial loss could be a result of the growing popularity and legitimacy of esports (Sport New Zealand, 2020).

Other articles did not claim replacement of traditional sport by esports but provided a number of direct comparisons. These articles compared esports players to rugby players, compared fan engagement to sporting events, noted sports franchises that have esports teams (e.g., NBA), and utilised typical sport language such as leagues and draft selections. The establishment of sporting structures, for example the approval of the NZESF as a national sporting body, provides a direct comparison from sports to esports that provides arguments for seeing esports as a legitimate sport. Many articles cite esports regulations, professional equipment, and sport organisation structures to promote esports as legitimate (Kinnear, 2019c; Steenkamp, 2018). In these articles, esports is presented as a sport because there are international, national and local bodies which oversee and regulate esports as a sport. The arguments affirming these structures are broad, reaching to comment on drug testing and match fixing regulations, tournament standards, professional pathways, coaches and team managers, esports betting standards, and agreed principles and values for the sport. Articles highlight regulations often especially when discussing esports and children or youth. The regulations or structures can be large international tournament rules or can be as small as "teams must be supervised by a teacher, [and] meeting their expected NCEA requirements…" (Bain, 2017, para. 18).

The comparison to sporting events is very strong across articles, citing fans wearing their team colours, asking for autographs and travelling around the world to see their favourite esports teams play. Articles comment on professional events held in stadia with specialised event equipment and large numbers of enthusiastic fans in the stands. Articles quote 500, 1,000, 7,000, and 35,000 seat stadiums being packed with fans. The lights, the professional commentators, and the televised programming are all pointed to as displaying the true colours of esports as a sport. One initially sceptical journalist who is subsequently converted to viewing esports as a sport notes the familiar fan behaviour in the crowds of an esports tournament.

> *As we walk far away, I hear them yelling "Aussie Aussie Aussie, oi oi oi"… and make no mistake, what is happening at the Intel Extreme Masters is sport. This is a sport. (Brooks, 2018, para. 9)*

The ability for esports to be played recreationally was also cited. Articles sought to show how esports can be played in a variety of ways which allows the activity to be played for amateur leisure as well as within professional leagues. It is inferred that this flexibility to be played for leisure or for competitive sport makes esports a true sport, and a legitimate choice as a recreational pastime. One article discusses this feature of esports as a recreational activity and professional sport,

> *Esports is kind of like casual sports in a way: there are a lot of people that kick around a football but don't watch the A league. But then there's the hypercompetitive version of it, where people compete internationally for crazy money at the higher levels. (Sharp, 2020, para. 3)*

The comparisons of sport and esports were common across all articles and seek to legitimise esports as positive comparisons; nevertheless, journalists and organisations alike appear concerned about this activity calling itself a sport, and these concerns are stated very publicly. Provocative articles from outspoken journalists like the blog Whale Oil Beef Hooked claimed that "almost all traditional sports fans are united in sneering at e-sports" (2019). Popular New Zealand journalist Hilary Barry, in response to the claim esports as a sport in a segment, exclaimed "what is wrong with the world?" (Jackson, 2019, para. 4). As found within the repeated justification of esports, the constant comparison of sports and esports suggests that esports is not yet widely accepted by the public. Further, the comments from Sport New Zealand that contemplate esports as a threat to participation in traditional sport and physical activity suggest that these comparisons may not be helpful for legitimising esports in New Zealand society.

The Impact of Esports on Participants

Health and well-being

As already noted, one of the findings is that the public discourse on esports is largely divided and many articles focus on viewing esports as a sport which has positive outcomes. In order to persuade the reader of the positive attributes of esports, there is a distinct focus on how esports has a positive impact on the health and well-being of players (Ramella-Zampa et al., 2022). The positive impacts are broad and largely follow similar claims to sporting organisations (Jenny et al., 2016).

Esports is social

The most common personal positive attribute which was described as being generated through esports playing was connecting socially with others. Esports is often referenced within articles as a way for children, youth, and adults to connect with each other as family members and friends. One programme, Learn with League, describes esports as a way for shy young people to make friends, stating,

> *"They are shy and find it hard to connect with their peers. But within their favourite online game, they are able to talk to others with similar interests in a way that feels less overwhelming." (Davies, 2020, p. 16)*

Articles describe esports leagues as “creating communities and friendships with technology” (Your Corps, 2019), and note that playing esports not only provides a platform for friendship creation, but also assists in the learning of social skills, communication and teamwork similar to the positive attributes that are promoted within traditional sport (Collins, 2013; Frey & Eitzen, 1991).

Esports is healthy

Playing esports and videogames is also argued to be a healthy activity for all ages, which promotes an accessible, fun and relaxing leisure activity. Playing esports is seen to improve self-confidence and connect those struggling with mental health to activity and friendships.

> *“Gaming can be a positive and enjoyable pastime, helping young people to connect with others, feel socially included and improve their self-esteem.” (Davies, 2020, p. 11)*

It is also a way for students to be able to represent their school or New Zealand, which in turn provides a sense of belonging with friends and society. One esports player notes below the feeling of representing New Zealand in esports.

> *Representing New Zealand and the University of Canterbury in the FISU meant a whole new world for me," he said. "I'm so grateful, honoured and thrilled at the same time to be chosen to compete in a world tournament." (Houston, 2020, para. 12).*

For adults, videogames and esports is noted as both a social connector and a method to maintain physical motor movements and cognitive strength.

> *“After having a stroke I was told to play games as it would help get the use of my arm back and between games and knitting I have my arm back! (Female, 36)” (Digital New Zealand, 2018, pg. 4)*

> *“I feel they keep my brain active and my hand eye co-ordination up to speed, as I’m aging these things are slowing down. It is also relaxing. (Female, 58)” (Digital New Zealand, 2018, pg. 19)*

Other articles highlight that professional esports players have similar schedules to professional athletes including training for specific hours per day, ensuring sleep schedules, following a healthy diet, and going to the gym for a daily workout.

> *“They have coaches (usually former players themselves) and often have strict schedules for play and training for hours every day. Many have diets and daily workout regimes, to keep their reflexes quick.” (Radio New Zealand, 2019, para. 25).*

"We put aside time to go to the gym, go for a run, exercise, make sure we're eating well ... everyone thinks as a gamer, we just sit on our computers for 14 hours, not really doing anything, just playing the game, but there's a lot more to it." (Kinnear, 2019a, para. 24)

Esports create good citizens

Some articles focus on the ability for esports to create good citizens, promoting respect, social collaboration and teamwork, leadership skills, resilience and discipline (Bain, 2021). The inference within these remarks is that esports teaches these skills and is also an acceptable activity for people who value these personal attributes. Mimicking the positive attributes of traditional sport one high school, Carmel College, noted the discipline and teamwork required.

"Each team and individual worked extremely hard to improve their skills and the entire team worked together collaborating to play the best games possible and attempt to defeat the opposition teams… Valorant has encouraged teamwork and strengthened our players' collaborative skills, as well as elevating our strategic ability, fluid intelligence and quick thinking" (Carmel College, 2021, para. 3).

Esports is seen as an activity that requires skill, requires discipline, and includes working well with others (CCC Newsline, 2021). These attributes are key lessons for young people to take onto successful employment and being accepted into society.

Esports is unhealthy

Conversely to the positive affects esports can have on health and wellbeing, there were many instances within the articles where particularly judgemental language is used to describe personal attributes of esports players. For instance, the description of a South Korean esports player:

"At 5-foot-8 and 119 pounds, his frame barely fills out the uniform; his cheekbones are so sharp, they cast shadows across his face" (Strang, 2016, para. 11).

This quote describes this athlete, who is one of the world's best players, as one would describe an anorexic teenager. The sentence is provocative, and certainly could be taken as offensive. Players are also described by journalists as dirty, messy, sweaty, and nervous. Examples include articles which describe players as 'a human who can barely even keep his laptop screen clean' (Brooks, 2018, para. 6) or call players shut-ins who never leave the house (Savory, 2021a). Within the negative code 'Unhealthy', the word 'dark' is used to describe the typical behavior of players 8 times. Some articles argue that esports impact on health is negative both for physical health and mental health, stating that 'screen-time and burnout has negative impact on mental health' when referring to the potential impacts of esports (Sport New Zealand, 2020). One gamer

noted "…people come up to me and say 'you don't look like a gamer', and I say, 'well, what does a gamer look like?" (Yates, 2015, para. 34). This quote suggests that even if a player is perceived as presenting themselves in a manner deemed acceptable by that individual, people are surprised. This demonstrates the societal bias that remains present for both videogame players and esports athletes.

Esports as unproductive

Playing esports, according to some public discourse, is simply unproductive. Articles suggest that the acquired skills are not relevant to real life, and even if you are able to play at an amateur level it is too difficult to make a career out of esports. One article puts this claim very bluntly, saying "so... how do I win all this money? Basically, you can't" (Radio New Zealand, 2019). The difficulty of becoming an esports player is clear to those who follow or play esports as well. Commenters claim that there are many more millions of players across the world within esports than individual sports like rugby (Stuff, 2021). This, they claim, makes reaching the top more difficult than other sports and interviewed players have commented on the reality they see.

> *"It's very, very difficult to become the [Cristiano] Ronaldo of esports, and for every major celebrity that exists in esports, there are hundreds of thousands of people who didn't make it to that top tier." (Deguara, 2021, para. 17)*

Some advocates utilise the rhetorical structure that this study has found repeated within articles to describe a stereotype of unproductive citizens living with their parents, in order to then argue the opposite point that esports is a skilled activity which can result in job opportunities inside of esports or in related fields such as game development or information and technology careers. An example of this justificatory language used to discuss the productivity of esports is demonstrated in this quote from an article in 2019,

> *"Some people see gaming as an unproductive pastime. But the growing phenomenon is proving to be an undeniable force that can lead to careers in professional gaming, coding, and game development." (University of Waikato, 201, para. 1)*

The justifying language applied when discussing the career opportunities for esports players suggests that the author feels a need to defend esports and argue that it is not a waste of time, urging that "it's a real job and it pays a salary" (Mahika, 2021, para. 1). In one article, the author's opinion is that "as a society, we have labelled video game fans as lazy, unhealthy and unproductive which has had the effect of shutting down conversations before they even begin" (Learn with League, 2020). It is clear that the perceptions of esports as productive or unproductive is a key consideration in New Zealand, with the difficulty to becoming an esports professional being mentioned 50 times, and esports being a waste of time being mentioned 35 times.

Further, esports being described as an activity that provides career opportunities was mentioned 404 times in 138 articles, almost half of all articles reviewed.

Esports and young people

Children, youth, young people, and millennials are mentioned hundreds of times within articles reviewed and appear to be a key point of discussion for New Zealand on the topic of esports. The perceived potential positive or negative impacts of esports on young people (including ages within childhood to teenagers to young adults) are discussed at length and there are differing views. Positively, esports commonly promotes the ability for young people to connect socially with the positive code Social Collaboration being used 276 times and the 6th most used positive code. In fact, aside from codes that compare esports to sport and discuss the esports industry, Social Collaboration is the most commonly used positive justification for the benefits of esports. Young esports players are quoted as saying "[esports] have allowed me to make many more friends than I ever dreamed of and are amazing" (Digital New Zealand, 2019, p. 32), and "when it was announced their team has won everyone was yelling out and all their friends came up" (James, 2021, para. 6).

Despite the arguments that esports is a positive influence for young people, nevertheless esports is described 46 times as an unhealthy pastime for children, youth or young people. The reasons stated for this include the amount of time spent playing, social isolation from others, contribution to mental illness, gaming addiction, unsafe online activities and simply spending too much time indoors. An Otago Daily Times journalist sums up a number of the commonly mentioned concerns for young esports players within one quote,

> *No taxiing around town is the good news, but that can also be worrying if you fear seeing less of your youngster than you'd like, worry about them being less obviously social with their peers, not getting enough sleep, being too sedentary and being overexposed to violence. And lots of screen time isn't great for kids. (Munro, 2019, para. 7)*

Sport New Zealand also commented on the perceived negative impact of esports on young people and appear to agree with the potential health risks of esports both for physical and mental health of young people.

> *"The emergence of the eSports sector occurs at a time when the demographic most likely to engage is experiencing pressure on mental health. New Zealand's suicide levels are in line with the OECD average, but for males under 25, we have the highest rate – and Māori are disproportionately represented in that statistic… The management of the interrelationship between the two trends will*

> *be critical as mental health issues remain a pervasive problem in the eSports scene amid reports of eSports players burning out in their 20s." (Sport New Zealand, 2020, pg. 40)*

Sport New Zealand suggests that esports is a contributor to poor mental health in young people, aligning a statistic for suicide alongside discussion of esports. There is no direct connection made between these statistics and esports, and no casual attribution is made, but the two subjects being discussed close together suggests Sport New Zealand is inferring there is a correlation between these subjects.

There are others that also fear that esports impact the mental well-being of children, with one journalist commenting that "parents seem to have this intrinsic fear of video games because they think it's going to turn their little angels into sociopaths" (Woo, 2017, para. 1). While not all articles describe esports players so negatively, some simply point to esports and videogames being an activity for social outcasts who are "playing video games by themselves in their bedrooms with the curtains closed" (Savory, 2021b, para. 11). One direct description of a successful professional esports player noted that the young man "comes across as a nervous person and repeatedly apologies for his sweaty hands" (Steenkamp, 2018, para. 11). These descriptions highlight the perceived social isolation for young esports players, regardless of the financial or popular success they have gained.

The amount of screen time is of particular concern, with the perceived idea that esports results in a reduction of physical activity among young people. One article proposes the question, "what impact will esports have on tamariki leisure time when we are trying to increase physical activity?" (Tutty, 2022, para. 20). This commentator suggests that esports are replacing physical activity with sedentary leisure time at the expense of the health of children and youth.

One way these negative impacts are addressed by esports advocates in the articles reviewed is through implementing structure and rules for participation. These structures are highlighted within articles to show that any worrying behaviour or potential negative impacts will be removed or mitigated, such as schools who implement minimum academic achievement to participate on the esports team, as well as programmes like Learn with League who also provide education on physical and emotional well-being, and safety online. There were many articles that focused on popular high school esports leagues throughout New Zealand, and these articles included paragraphs to comfort the reader that the students were given structures and supervision to ensure their safety.

> *Mikaere said there were age restrictions, adult supervision and professional coaching that ensured everyone was well fed, watered and had adequate time away from the screens. (Mahika, 2019, para. 28).*

The focus on these structures and rules demonstrates a lack of trust in esports as a positive influence on young people. Structures and rules are highlighted to provide comfort from a perception that esports has a negative impact on child and youth development which would lead to adverse outcomes for the young person as an adult.

Other articles outline the positive impacts that esports can have on young people. They address safety online and the ability for esports to contribute to producing happy, healthy, productive, and responsible civilians.

> *"Whether the students play from home or at school, the vast majority of the positives of competing remain, such as communication, cooperation, camaraderie, teamwork, leadership, school pride and socialisation." (Waikato News, 2020, para. 13)*

The above quote shows the breadth of ways that esports is noted to have a positive impact on young people, focusing on the positive outcomes rather than the concerns about the effect of screen time on the current and future generation of youth and young people.

Moral and ethical objections

Videogames have been viewed negatively for many years and esports is not exempt from similar criticisms. There are several moral and ethical objections to esports, and some large sporting organisations point to these ethical dilemmas as a reason for esports to be illegitimate or unsupported. In one case, the moral objection was compared directly to hell itself. Discussing the attendance at an esports event, one journalist states "hell is empty, and it has sent its demons to sit directly in front of me" (Brooks, 2018, para. 11). These are strong words and represent the publications and articles that did not hold back on their disapproval of esports both as a sport and as a recreational activity that has positive outcomes.

Other ethical objections within articles criticise the violence portrayed within the videogames played at esports tournaments. Despite one article citing New Zealand research that undertook a meta-analysis of literature on violence and videogames, and found violent actions and videogames are not related (Hern, 2020), articles remain asking probing questions on whether violent video games influence aggressive behaviour in youth (Deguara, 2020). Some games are touted as "designed to spread hate and encourage killing" (Radio New Zealand, 2017, para. 16). The comments from the IOC on esports being "too violent and not in line with their values" (Alderson, 2022., para. 5) as well as being "contradictory to the Olympic values and cannot therefore be accepted" (Kinnear, 2019a, para. 38) were well quoted within New Zealand media. One political blog even notes that a successful esports player Sam Kaiwai should not expect to be

photographed with then current New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, due to the fact that the game he plays is a first-person shooter game (Lushington, 2019). This highlights a key inference by the writer – esports players who play first-person shooting games are not accepted in New Zealand society or prominent New Zealand figures, even if esports players are successful on the world stage.

While violence was noted often as a negative impact of esports, two alternative opinions were also found. One article noted that the lack of actual physical violence within esports is the key difference between sports and esports, citing physical violence as a critical defining aspect of sport. The violence within esports is conversely thematic, and unreal, rather than the in-person physical act of combat. This difference is suggested to be a positive aspect of esports compared to traditional sport, with commentators noting that the missing physicality against opponents is a positive attribute.

> *"All the elements that you see in sport, other than maybe getting punched in the face, are there." (McDonald, 2018, para. 3)*

Another acknowledgement of the violence involved in traditional sport takes another view. Violence, according to the writer, is so integral to traditional sport that a show of physical fighting at a recent esports tournament fundamentally changes the activity from non-sport to sport.

> *"When two young men began to punch one another in the head at the 2016 League of Legends national champs, they definitively proved that League of Legends is just as capable of inciting off-field violence as soccer or rugby, and is thus worthy of the title of sport. Kind of." (The Spin Off, 2016, para. 22)*

Other ethical objections include gambling and cheating that are present within esports. Sport New Zealand, as well as gambling harm organisations like the Problem Gambling Association have called attention to the harm that esports brings with it across performance enhancement drug use, cheating, and gambling (Goodall, 2017; Radio New Zealand, 2020). On the subject of problem gambling, some organisations see the games themselves, especially those with lootboxes or other paid in-game mystery prizes, as being a pathway to gambling, setting up similar dopamine-induced rushes that are present within slot machines and claim that some videogames are being set up to create a "new demographic of problem gamblers" (Steenkamp, 2018, para. 50).

Others raise concerns about the introduction of esports as a sport which can be included within legal sports betting in New Zealand. The articles reviewed in this study do mention that there have already been reported instances of match-throwing and performance enhancement drug use within esports to gain an advantage over the other team (Howell, 2020). Sport New Zealand has approved esports as a sport which can be wagered on, but questions the impact of this and whether esports may have 'integrity issues', asking,

Will significant wagering on eSports come at expense of traditional sport? Performance enhancement and gambling practices will raise integrity issues. (Sport New Zealand, 2020, pg. 4)

The questions from Sport New Zealand above are interesting for any person involved in traditional sport, as performance enhancement integrity issues have been a widely debated issue within traditional sport for decades (Anderson and White, 2017). Further, sports gambling has also always been a key issue for traditional sport, particularly in New Zealand where community sport is heavily funded from the revenue gained through gambling. These integrity issues are present across all traditional sport at both amateur and professional levels.

Esports in New Zealand

Inclusion and Diversity

A commonly noted benefit of esports as a sport is the low barrier for entry across minority groups, its capacity to be highly accessible, and it's potential to connect physically inactive people to active recreation. While 18 articles claimed that esports is neither inclusive nor diverse, it was more common for articles to highlight the capacity for esports to cater for everyone. Indeed, the argument that esports positively contributes to providing an inclusive activity for a diverse demographic of participants was mentioned 146 times in 63 articles. One aspect of inclusivity discussed was that people with intellectual or physical disabilities were seen to be able to equally play and compete in esports alongside non-disabled persons and realise positive benefits from playing them.

"Now aged 13, people are regularly shocked to discover that he has autism… as for many people with disabilities, the accessibility of games empowers him to participate in team activities and online communities. Diversity and inclusion are real drivers for me." (New Zealand Game Developers Association, 2021).

For many players, esports is seen to provide an opportunity to engage in a sport that is inclusive of all body types, and is able to be played by those with physical disabilities without requiring separate para athlete leagues. One interviewed esports player said,

I think the coolest thing about esports is regardless of who you are, if you're in a wheelchair, or if you're fully able bodied, it doesn't matter. It's a total level playing field. (Sharp, 2020, para. 3)

Gender is another common topic of discussion within articles, both positively and negatively. Within articles that note the ability for esports to be inclusive of gender, esports is described as a sport that is an

equaliser, a sport where all genders can play the same game without one group being disadvantaged. It is argued that women are very interested in videogames and esports, both as participants and as spectators and fans. Esports is seen as a sport where males and females can equally become successful esports athletes within the same leagues. Relatedly, articles note diverse crowds who have come to watch an esports tournament:

> *"For a start, there is easily a 50/50 split of men and women in the crowd, and people of all ages and races. A common sight at the arena is parents with their kids – with a lot of the parents cheering along as much, if not more, than their kids." (McDonald, 2018)*

Despite a positive view on gender equality within esports being described in some articles, other authors and interviewed subjects disagree that esports offers an inclusive environment across all genders. The discourse which claimed that esports provided a negative experience for females argues both as suggestive commentary, as well as outright naming the issue. An example of commentary that does not name the inclusivity issue but instead suggests it, Brooks (2018, para. 8) reflects on his experience at an esports tournament and writes, "I observe: Mostly male, mostly young, mostly white." This observation is not simply telling the reader who is attending, but it is inferred and then expanded on in further paragraphs who the writer believes is missing from the crowd they observe – females, other age groups, other ethnicities. While some commentators suggest a lack of female representation, some articles include comments from female esports players who spoke on the impact that their gender has on their professional career, with one player noting that "people often disregarded my efforts until I was able to make it to the elite level" (Stuff, 2020). The same player also commented that teams told her they did not want her as a player due to the perceived 'drama' that she would bring due to her gender (Tresidder, 2020, para. 15). There were particular concerns about the lack of female representation within professional spheres, with one writer telling his fellow athletes that he disapproved of the attitude towards women and non-binary players in esports, saying "sort that shit out and stop bullying good players off teams, you big bunch of children" (The Spinoff, 2016, para. 36). Sport New Zealand (2021, pg. 37) commented in their own publication on studies reviewing gender and gaming that "even though there are approximately equal numbers of males and females who play video games, most professional gamers are male. Moreover, female players who achieve some levels of success are marginalized." This is a concern for Sport New Zealand who has targeted programming to increase female participation in play, active recreation and sport across New Zealand (Sport New Zealand, 2018).

There were also several articles and publications found that were promoting programmes and games for Māori and Pasifika communities in New Zealand. One article showcased the work of Māori-led and Pasifika-led businesses and initiatives to use videogames and esports as a positive tool for cultural education, with one article highlighting,

> *Te Whare Takaro aims to 59revitalise Māori language and culture through video games, while lending a hand to Māori interested in joining the gaming industry. (Wenman, 2019, para. 5)*

These initiatives, such as Te Whare Takaro quoted above, focus on the career and skill building opportunities of videogames, development of videogames in Te Reo Māori, as well as the opportunity to include education for young people on Te Reo Māori and Te Ao Māori.

An interesting comment and suggestion found in articles was the potential for people and communities who may not be interested in traditional sport to be connected to the sport and recreation world through esports. Peter Miskimmin, former CEO of Sport New Zealand commented on this potential connection in 2018.

> *Peter Miskimmin says engaging with young eSports fans could increase participation in traditional sport. (Radio New Zealand, 2018, para. 4)*

This idea of a person who is not engaged in sport changing leisure activities is also noted by the CEO of the New Zealand Esports Federation (NZESF), Jonathan Jansen in 2022.

> *He says 44 per cent of gamers have gone on to participate in traditional sport or active recreation with friends they first met while gaming. And 81 per cent are more open to participating in sports with friends that they game with. "Esports for many can be a social step into participating in traditional sport, and we support that pathway." (Smith, 2022, para. 37)*

The claim stems from the idea that esports may act as a bridge for young people who previously did not engage in sport, to learn the game through playing videogames and seek to play the game in real life. Commentary on the potential capacity of esports to connect non-sport participants to traditional sport was mentioned 44 times in 29 articles by both traditional sport commentators and esports advocates.

The accessibility of esports was criticised by 10 articles for being too expensive, claiming that the cost of computer equipment and game make the sport inaccessible for those who cannot afford them.

> *"We don't want to create barriers for those who can't happen to afford these computers. There is so much social benefit from being in the same room as each other," said Jansen (Tutty, 2022, para. 27)*

There is a cost to esports and there is certainly concern that access is required to be able to participate. The cost of the computers and equipment, as well as fast internet, makes a large difference to the level of game play. Time delays, or 'lags' within game play, create a large advantage for opponents with faster internet and better connection to overseas servers.

Conversely, 19 articles argued that a key positive feature of esports was the accessibility component, noting that the "online nature of esports made it easy to get into for both players and spectators" (Howell, 2020b, para. 12). The accessibility of esports is particularly relevant for racing esports like Formula 1 where the cost barrier to participate is far higher than esports, especially for professional drivers. In an interview of New Zealand esports athlete, Daniel Pinkham, he noted that "motorsport can be an expensive hobby and [esports] is a way for those who cannot afford to fork out for a vehicle to enjoy the thrill of racing" (Beck, 2019, para. 10). Therefore, the arguments between articles suggest that while the cost of computer equipment to access esports is seen as inaccessible to some, others see the cost barrier as lower than other sports, providing a more accessible connection to professional athlete status.

Conflicting Demographic Reporting in Public Discourse

Discussions on the inclusiveness of esports for all people rely on an understanding of who plays esports and who does not. Otherwise, there is no avenue to discuss the inclusion or exclusion of particular groups. Comments on the appearance, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, age, and generation of both esports and videogame players occurred frequently within articles. Although the frequency of the commentary on the age and gender of esports players was common, as found earlier in the articles with polarised views, the consistency and accuracy of the commentary on esports was very poor. The following paragraphs outline conflicting points of views on who the majority of videogame and esports players are.

Many articles described esports players as children. One writer noted that "nothing is more infuriating than losing to some jumped-up, pre-pubescent bastard" (The Spinoff, 2016, para. 2) while another describes esport event attendees as 'puberty-breaching boys' (Brooks, 2018, para. 18). Primary league competitions note the ages of the winning teams as being 11 and 12 years old. One interviewed esports hopeful was 14 years old, while noting that he was too young to compete in a current tournament. The youngest competitor in a high-ranking world cup was reported to be 13 years old (Momoisea, 2019). Other articles discussed primarily teenagers from high schools in New Zealand. Some high school leagues describe the entry ages to be 10 to 18 years old, and view esports as an opportunity to engage with youth (Tutty, 2022). The average age of a Fortnite world cup was reported at 16 years old (Momoisea, 2019), and there were a few interviewed esports players within articles reviewed that were aged 16 or 17. Reports on high school leagues in New Zealand noted ages such as 15, 16, and 17; however, it is not known whether these players are professional players or simply representing their school. One article claims that:

> *"eSports players are typically young: 17 is the age most go professional, and a 22-year-old player is considered a veteran. Almost all players retire before they're 25." (van Beynen, 2016, para. 26)*

Further to the claims that esports is played mostly by children or mostly by teenagers, some commentary on the demographics of esports players focused on male players. Esports events were noted as being catered to 'adolescent masculinity' (Brooks, 2018). Contrary to this, female players were both discussed and profiled within the articles reviewed. One successful esports player profiled in articles is 'Minxy' who is a female in her 20s, with a six-year-old child. Another article directly challenges the teenage male stereotype and claims that more adult women identify as gamers than teenage boys due to mobile games (Tsukayama, 2014) with another claiming that the fastest demographic for games is women over 35 (Smith, 2022). Digital New Zealand's research found that over half of videogame players were female, with 35 being the average age of players. However, all three of these articles discuss both esports and videogames 61interchangeably, and do not provide evidence of female esports participation which is an issue for the public to gain a full understanding of the demographics of esports players.

Beyond the claims that esports players are children, or teenagers, or boys, there was a third perception of esports players in New Zealand which stated that 'most esports players are aged 18-30' (Scoop, 2014, para. 8). According to the articles which profiled successful esports athletes, this claim could have some validity. At the time of the articles written, the ages of profiled esports athletes included: Sam Pearson (23), Robert Northway (34), Simon Bishop (29), Shakor Paki (20), Sharaz Aslam (20), Frederick Penaedonda (23), Bart Tamehana-King (27), Quin Korebrits (18), Lorien Gigich (24), Dhayana Sena (27), Darren Cox (29), Zac Woodham (20), Daniel Pinkham (18), "Korn_Nova" Choi (32), Chris Hunt (18), Mackenzie Smith (20), Ollie Jones (25), Paul Odlin (43), and Ashleigh Dougal (20s). However, relying on the ages and gender of those esports players who were profiled within New Zealand media is likely to result in a biased claim. Other commentary on age describes esports players vaguely as a 'young' demographic, or that introducing esports to facilities would bring a 'younger audience' (Esports Insider, 2020). Sport New Zealand describes esports players as 'people under 30', 'male' and 'millennial' (2020). These comments are inconsistent as millennials are widely accepted to be born between 1981 to 1996, making current millennials ages 26 to 41 years old, barely making the cut off for people under 30. The claim from Sport New Zealand on esports players as being millennials also conflicts with their other commentary that esports presents a threat to children and youth participating in traditional sport. If esports is being played primarily by those aged 26 and older, the issue of the impact of esports on child and youth development is no longer valid. Other organisations like the Vodafone Warriors make the same claim that they are looking to engage with millennials (Bräutigam, 2016), however it is unknown if they are also seeking to engage with those younger than millennials as well.

These contrasting views and claims note a clear gap in understanding the demographics of esports players, viewers, fans, and participants in New Zealand. Given the inconsistency of reporting, committing to any demographic statistic at this stage appears premature.

Esports Facilities in New Zealand

This theme captured the discussions on esports facilities, including highlighting where in New Zealand esports tournaments and training were occurring. There were 153 mentions of esports facilities across 80 articles, primarily reporting on where an upcoming tournament or league was to be played. Facilities included large stadiums (e.g., Eden Park, Central Energy Trust Arena, Stadium Southland), television studios (e.g., Sky Tower), schools and universities (e.g., University of Waikato), libraries (e.g., Tūranga Library), commercial buildings (e.g., Digital Natives Academy, Esports Gaming Whangarei), the storage room of indoor court facilities (e.g., The Dojo at Breakers HQ) and residential houses. Many articles highlighting new esports facilities focused on the key theme of justification, with most of the articles commenting on the reasons why an esports facility was both legitimate and needed. The facilities themselves are not discussed in detail, and the requirements for setting up an esports facility are not commented on either.

Support for Esports players in New Zealand

A criticism of esports in New Zealand from both esports advocates and esports sceptics is that esports is either too small (84 mentions) or unsupported in New Zealand (64 mentions). For those who are sceptics, that esports is popular overseas and there are opportunities in other countries, but in New Zealand the sport of esports does not require or deserve great attention as it is only a small activity. Sport New Zealand highlights the growing esports industry overseas, and then goes on to note:

> *The most common persona among gaming enthusiasts in New Zealand are people who play games, typically on mobile, to pass the time. eSports is not a major part of their lives. This may change. (Sport New Zealand, 2021, pg. 36)*

Esports advocates also note that the esports industry in New Zealand in small, noting that compared to US and Korean markets, "New Zealand's gaming market is nowhere near [their] level but Kiwi gamers could be offered full-time esports contracts in the not-so-distant future" (Kinnear, 2019a). One esports player, discussing the support for esports in New Zealand, commented "quite frankly, NZ doesn't do much for small/not-as popular sports" (Geekzone, 2019) and another said that they "don't think it's feasible to make a living in New Zealand as a professional gamer" (Gibson, 2016, para. 26). Articles cite that the insufficient support is due to a lack of facilities, culture, and support in New Zealand (Asura World, 2021; Davies, 2020) as well as being located in a difficult part of the world for server location during tournaments (Esports grizzly, 2021). Advocates also noted that esports is not as popular or supported in New Zealand as other parts of the world, noting that "the oceanic region definitely has a lot of ground to cover if it wants to catch up to the rest of the world" (Deguara, 2021, para. 21) and "New Zealand's gaming scene doesn't offer the same avenues for success" (Manch, 2016, para. 19).

Chapter 6 – Discussion

Discussion

Esports is Not Yet Accepted in New Zealand

There have been many recently invented sports that have struggled to be accepted by traditional sporting culture as comprising genuine sports, but ultimately have been accepted in full or in part (Kobiela, 2018). These have included snowboarding, surfing skateboarding, darts, formula one racing, and many others (Wheaton and Thorpe, 2018). Indeed, there are many sports vying to be included within the Olympics each year (Wheaton and Thorpe, 2018). Skateboarding was particularly unaccepted when it became popular. Skateboarding was tied to anti-social behaviour, drugs, loitering, low school attendance, noise, and criminal activity. The Olympics now includes skateboarding within the summer Olympics and skate parks in New Zealand are popular council-funded facilities for children and youth (Batuev and Robinson, 2017). The historical journey of previously unaccepted sports who have become widely accepted by both society and the sporting industry may provide hope to esports advocates.

However, esports provides a new challenge for traditional sport enthusiasts to accept its inclusion as a sport, and the content analysis found that there are many criticisms that the esports community faces to achieve acceptance in New Zealand. Aligned with common academic research topics which commonly focus on the 'dark side' of esports for teenagers and young people (Zhong et al., 2019), the New Zealand public discourse was found to focus strongly on impact of esports on the development of children and youth. Further, descriptions of esports and esports players were found to be written in justifying language which used a similar rhetorical format, often proposing a negative stereotype of esports players and then providing a counterargument as to why the negative stereotype is incorrect. The high frequency of justifying language in public discourse suggests that esports is still required to justify itself in New Zealand, especially as a sport.

Within the articles reviewed, esports was compared to sport frequently and the discussion on whether esports could be justified as a legitimate sport dominated the discourse with distinctly polarised views. Indeed, significantly, 'esports as a sport' was the most common code used across the entire set of articles reviewed. This discussion on the legitimacy of esports also dominates esports literature across

multiple disciplines (Zhong et al., 2019; Ramella-Zampa et al., 2022; Reitman et al., 2020). The question, or answer, found missing from both the New Zealand discourse and the esports literature reviewed was why the comparison needed to occur at all.

Esports is fundamentally and historically linked to the development of videogames, and videogames have also been included as a form of art in many circles, and they have also struggled with acceptance. It is argued by film critic Robert Ebert in an infamous article that interactive games can 'never be art' (Ebert, 2010) while other academics disagree, noting how philosophical theories which address traditional art can be used to address videogame as well (Tavinor, 2009). Videogames have also sought to be included in literary circles for embedded narratives and plots, which is met with both criticism (Rough, 2018) and justification for its inclusion (Simons, 2007). Despite the existence of this literature which focuses on many other aspects of videogames and debates its inclusion within other industries and social groups, the debates were not mentioned in public discourse or greatly discussed in esports literature, despite both of these mediums discussing videogames, and their history, at length. Therefore, there are other cultural groups within art, music, and literature who also debate the inclusion of videogames within their industry (Simons, 2007; Tavinor, 2009; Rough, 2018), but the justification of esports does not acknowledge it either in literature or in public discourse. Further the need of esports to be included within the sports industry is either not mentioned or it is stated that esports does not even need sports but rather the reverse is true (New Zealand Herald, 2019). The most frequent justification found for esports being both a sport and a positive activity was its deep pockets; articles discussed the growth of esports, the financial opportunities, promising career paths and its global popularity. Given that the financial opportunities within esports are well-known and publicised (Hallmann & Giel, 2018; Ramella-Zampa, 2022), esports is unlikely to require the support of the sports industry for financial support or to gain popularity with new participants. In fact, considering the past hesitance of traditional sports organisations like the IOC to fully accept emerging sports, even though there has been a recent change with IOC embracing new sports to attract younger viewers (Thorpe & Wheaton, 2019), it may be beneficial for esports to limit comparisons to sport and focus on resolving the central thread from which their critics pull. This central thread, of course, is videogames.

The findings from this study further confirms the work by Newman (2008) in finding that public discourse in New Zealand on esports mirrors the themes found by Newman on videogames. As found by Newman (2008), videogames are critiqued within public discourse and the media for their negative impact on sociality, creativity, productivity and literacy in young people, as well as the perceived prevalence of violence. This study found a high frequency of comments around the negative impact of esports on children, youth and young people, including the fear of social isolation (sociality), fear of an activity that is a waste of time and unskilled (creativity), fear of children spending too much time playing and unable to have a meaningful career

(productivity), and the fear of gaming affecting study time (literacy). However, the discourse in New Zealand focused very little on the negative impact of esports on literacy or learning; instead, the discourse frequently used justifying language to highlight potential positive impacts of esports or videogames on learning. Violence and ethical considerations were found to be a key concern in New Zealand, again aligning with the findings of Newman (2008).

Other found criticisms of videogames within literature included instances of gambling or gambling-like behaviour such as lootboxes (Drummond et al., 2019; Griffiths et al., 2000) inclusion and diversity issues such as female representation (Williams, 2002; Patridge, 2018; Ruvalcaba et al., 2018), gaming addiction, physical and mental health (Billieux et al.,2019; Lopez-Fernandez et al., 2019; Arnaez, 2018). Discourse on esports in New Zealand also discussed problem gambling and lootboxes within games themselves, but also expressed concerns about cheating and doping while gambling on esports. Inclusion and diversity was discussed frequently within articles, particularly around how females are portrayed within esports as well as female representation as athletes. However, videogames were noted as inaccessible and excluding some populations due to the expense of computer equipment within New Zealand public discourse, which was not found as a critique of videogames. The contribution of esports to gaming addiction, physical inactivity and poor mental health were key perceived negative attributes of esports through the content analysed which aligns with academic literature on videogames.

These wide-ranging criticisms of esports are aligned with public critiques of videogames (Newman, 2008) and may require focus to address accepted and long-held beliefs of these negative stereotypes, and yet the most frequent comments found in this study, and within academic literature on esports, is the focus of comparing esports and sport. Pehkonen et al. (2016) conducted research into the motivations of dog agility organisations to be declared a sport and noted that it is argued that contemporary politics is often about the need and demand for recognition (Taylor, 1994). Indeed, Fraser and Honneth (2003) note the political interplay between political and economic spheres while capital flows into some sports and not others. Therefore, Pehkonen et al. (2016) intimates, there is a continuous struggle for identity through social acceptance, and financial gains through political acceptance. However, as previously noted, esports enjoys both well-known global popularity and financial success which does not align with the theory from Pehkonen et al. (2016). The benefits or motivation for esports advocates and players to continually justify themselves as a sport and athletes within discourse were not a primary focus of this study; however, one article did note a pragmatic reason for esports to argue for the official sports title which was the international tournament attendance benefits through the existence of athlete visas (Stuff, 2016). It was noted that gaining appropriate visas to attend tournaments in other countries was difficult if esports was not classified as a sport (Stuff,

2016). Further research on the motivations of esports advocates to compare esports to sports may provide insight on other factors that fuel this constant comparison.

Regardless of the motivation, the comparison between sports and esports remain a central focus for the public discourse and academia which it is argued by some to be difficult to conclude due to the lack of agreed definition of esports (Reitman et al., 2020; Ramella-Zampa, 2022).The definition is difficult to agree, due to the convergence of technology, media, games (Jin, 2010). Beyond the debate on definition, the acceptance of esports by traditional sport remains incredibly challenging for the sport industry. It was found that negative commentary on esports within discourse included the notion that esports was replacing traditional sport, as well as ethical and moral considerations, particularly for children and youth. Aligned with the public discourse reviewed, Sport New Zealand, in particular, utilised language which presented esports as a threat to traditional sport and claimed this would have ethical and moral impacts, particularly on young people (Sport New Zealand, 2020). The threat of esports is perceived by Sport New Zealand (2020) to potentially influence future decreases in physical activity, and because physical activity is a key aim and purpose of Sport New Zealand, the popularity of esports was seen as a concern. Concerns about the dropping participation rates in traditional sports clubs is not new and is well-documented (Sport New Zealand, 2021), and therefore esports is viewed as a competitor for discretionary time. The discretionary time of potential sporting participants is viewed as a finite resource, which is seen to be competed for across all leisure activities from television, social media, recreation, play, family time, reading and more. Esports is viewed as a negative competitor to sporting activities due to its perceived negative effect on health and physical activity, the evidence for which is debated (Arnaez et al., 2018; Ballard et al., 2009; Trotter et al., 2020; Marker et al., 2019).

The actual evidence for esports as a threat to traditional sport, by 'stealing' participants, is not available within current esports research (Ramella-Zampa, 2022; Reitman et al., 2020). The evidence to generate such research with available data would be near impossible due to one of the significant findings of this study. The study found that the reported data in public discourse on the demographics of esports players and fans in New Zealand is conflicting which makes it difficult to understand who they are. While traditional sports may be concerned at a growing trend of participants choosing casual, low-commitment social leagues or minority sports (Sport New Zealand, 2016), it is currently not possible to accurately state whether their decreasing participants also play esports. Further, it is currently not possible to accurately state whether esports participants play sport or would have ever played sport. There is conflicting data on the demographics of esports participants, with some anecdotes within articles point to esports players who have never liked sport, and others describe athletes who also play esports. However, there remains a possibility that the participants with available discretionary time may not have ever been a possible sporting participant regardless of the existence of esports. This finding highlights an issue for perceptions of esports in New Zealand, as there are

competing views and attitudes on who exactly plays esports in New Zealand. This includes unknown demographics of both amateur and recreational players, as well as professional athletes. The ability to be confident in the reporting of these statistics is vital for future planning and decision making around esports in New Zealand. The opposing viewpoints on the impact of esports on the future of society are often linked to the age and demographic of the players. The absence of this data provides too many discrepancies in arguments both affirmative and negative.

While the majority of discourse was polarised, either justifying esports as a sport or arguing that it is not a sport, there were a number of comments which discussed the possibility for esports to act as a bridge between videogames and participation in traditional sport, or other forms of physical activity. This was noted by both sports industry commentators and esports commentators. It appears that this is a place that two opposing groups can find a common ground. While this is an interesting finding for research, it also has a directly applicable industry outcome. Where esports programmes can develop connections to other sports and physical activities, sporting organisations which struggle with the concept may concede to the activity under a programme which connects non-sporting participants to sport and active recreation. This may generate value for traditional sports bodies as well as positioning esports as a legitimate recreation and sport choice. There is an opportunity for both hesitant sporting organisations and esports communities to collaborate on these mutually beneficial outcomes to explore what partnership could look like in the future.

A further collaboration may also be possible through shared facility use to assist with the connection between non-sporting participants and sport. This study found that esports training facilities do not appear to have collaborated greatly with sport and recreation or community facilities in New Zealand. Within the public discourse analysed, esports advocates justify its place as a sport in New Zealand, but the facilities used are predominately outside of typical community sport spaces and places. Both the shared facility and shared programme collaboration suggestions present an opportunity for future academic and industry research on the ability for esports to connect non-sporting participants with physical activity.

The Ethics of Esports

The 'Great Sport Myth' (GSM) was coined by academic Jay Coakley and outlines a blind social acceptance of sport. His analysis found that as sport is socially accepted as inherently pure and good, has positive outcomes for sporting participants, which is seen as leading to individual and community development. Therefore, society at large finds no reason to study or analyse sport critically (Coakley, 2015). Anderson and White expand on this 'myth', highlighting negative outcomes of sport under particular topics such as health and wellbeing (2017). While both Anderson and White and Coakley seek to challenge the GSM narrative by highlighting the negative outcomes of sport, there is a large body of research confirming the

positive outcomes that sport provides those who choose to play (Coakley et al., 2011; Wilson et al., 2022). This presents a polarised view of sport, perhaps before esports as a topic is even introduced. As found in the literature review and in the research completed, for each argued negative outcome of esports, traditional sport can also be found to include this negative outcome as well (Anderson & White, 2017). There are arguments that sport or esports produce fully true positive outcomes or fully true negatives outcomes.

For example, violence is a common topic of conversation for both esports and videogames, used by the IOC and sporting organisations as a key reason for not engaging with the world of esports (Newstalk ZB, 2022). Esports and videogames are both blamed for violent behaviour, regardless of how many research projects find this to be untrue (Newman, 2008; Griffths, 1999; Harris, 2001; Unsworth and Ward, 2001). Early videogames could be argued to be violent. Spacewar! could be accused of being a war themed game, including shooting down spaceships. However, the new reality is modern technology has created videogames which are more realistic than early shooting games, which more obviously depict violence, and which many find more confronting (Waddington, 2007).

While these arguments on violence and ethics are frequently brought up by sports enthusiasts, it is difficult to continue this criticism very far. As found in the literature review, historically sport has been connected to violence, such as the 'warrior' sports of Rome including javelin throwing (Coakley et al., 2011). Organised sport has been claimed to be born out of war, training young men early to become soldiers if required in Europe (Crotty and Hess, 2016). If one wishes to disregard the history of sporting violence, new sporting forms like MMA are inherently violent, and the highly regarded sport of rugby in New Zealand includes strong physical attacks and has been criticised for its link to domestic violence (Hill and Fuller, 2016). Further, it can be argued that the violence of esports is thematic and does not physically harm human beings while sport does include physical harm. Anderson and White (2017) discuss the violence involved in sport including combat, physical attacks, and physical injuries such as concussions and broken bones. Regardless, governments around the world, including New Zealand, continue to fund physically violent sports perhaps due to the perception that sport is accepted as inherently good (Coakley, 2015).

Esports was also criticised often within articles for a lack of international regulations and a lack of structure, resulting in doping, match fixing, harm to children, gambling, inappropriate advertising, demeaning depictions of women and harmful environments for females and other diverse populations. Literature has also discussed these criticisms, noting the potential for cheating and doping (Murray et al., 2020; Scelles et al., 2021), inequality for women (Patridge, 2018; Ruvalcaba et al., 2018), and gambling (Griffiths et al., 2000). Therefore, the types of criticisms esports faces were found to be consistent between academic literature and within New Zealand public discourse. However, unlike academic literature, public discourse did not discuss whether the criticisms aimed at esports could be also applied to traditional sport regardless of the academic

evidence that traditional sport does experience several similar issues. Doping and performance enhancement drug use is a major issue for traditional sport including at the Olympic level, requiring an international body to manage the impact and regulations for this issue (Hunt and Hoberman, 2011). Gambling and inappropriate advertisements have been issues within sport for many years (Murray et al., 2018; Carr, 2015), particularly in New Zealand where the funding model for community sport is directly connected to gambling profits, viewing this funding as vital to their survival (Adams, 2012). Sport has had an issue with female bodies and depictions of women for decades from uniform scandals, allegations of sexual abuse, use of models and cheerleaders within particular sports, and the treatment of female athletes as 'less than' (Birrell, 1988; Burton, 2015; Collins, 2013). The discriminatory treatment of those who do not fit the model of sport, for example those within the LGBTQ2+ community, are well documented (Anderson and White, 2017; Collins, 2013). There is a plethora of evidence that sport can produce negative impacts, several of which are the same criticisms aimed at esports.

Therefore, the breadth of arguments for and against both sport and esports participation suggest that the attributed outcomes for both activities are neither definitively good, nor definitively bad. The outcomes are not black or white; they are grey, and they are complex. This could be a central reason that polarising positive and negative sentiments were found so strongly within articles discussing esports – sports and esports provide both opportunities and challenges. Viewing strongly held beliefs in tension is difficult and requires cognitive flexibility. Further, since traditional sport has been challenged in its relevance in modern culture amidst funding pressures, the admission that esports could be one of many possible tools for wellbeing, recreation, community, and patriotism may arise understandable fear that the sporting landscape may change substantially and challenges the beliefs surrounding the Great Sport Myth (Coakley, 2015). Still, sport is still presented within articles as an inherently good activity even when the criticism of esports is a key issue for traditional sport, such as gender equality (Collins, 2013).

As found, esports is not yet accepted in New Zealand and therefore does not receive the same immediate acceptance that sport is afforded from hundreds of years of play in New Zealand, and thousands of years of acceptance in Europe (Collins, 2013). This research confirms Coakley's review that traditional sport remains tightly held as 'good' in New Zealand, while esports is required to continually justify its own existence regardless of popularity, financial benefit, or professionalism unlike traditional sport which is accepted without scrutiny.

Chapter 8 – Conclusion

Conclusion

Esports is a relatively new publicly discussed activity in New Zealand, with the national sporting body NZESF being approved by Sport New Zealand in 2020. While the conversation and research completed on esports has been conducted in other places like Europe, North America, and Asia, the research in New Zealand is very limited. Research on esports in New Zealand has focused on overseas esports industries or athlete motivation. This research sought to provide a broad, exploratory investigation of the public discourse and attitudes towards esports in New Zealand to contribute to the foundation of academic research on esports.

The research found that there were distinct positive and negative sentiments about the subject of esports within articles reviewed, and that comments were starkly polarised in their commentary about esports. The commentary was also found to exhibit a justification rhetorical structure which was found repeated 71 times throughout the content. This structure begins by stating a stereotype which the author believes it an accepted concept for the reader (esports is for anti-social teenagers), and then proceeds to argue the opposite viewpoint to persuade the reader of a different point of view. The justification sentence structure, as well as other justifying language, was found throughout the articles reviewed. Esports was also seen as a threat to traditional sport and perceived to be competing for two resources – time and money. There were varying reports on whether esports presented an opportunity for positive impacts or whether esports brings serious negative consequences. The varying positive and negative comments which reached across themes such as esports and young people, productivity or unproductivity, health and well-being, and moral objections. These themes aligned closely with the critiques of videogames in public discourse (Newman, 2008), and suggest that the perceptions of videogames influence public discourse on esports.

For esports in New Zealand, there appeared to be no widely accepted demographic statistics on the players or fans of esports, with articles and publications describing the majority demographics of players and fans in directly opposing ways. The information available on these statistics appears to be premature and further research to understand the demographics of New Zealand participants is required to improve commentary on the opportunities or challenges faced by sport organisations and esports organisations. For example, a suggestion was made that esports may provide a ‘bridge’ between non-sport players and sporting

opportunities. This appears to be an opportunity for both esports and sports to work towards a shared goal, however, the potential success of the opportunity is difficult to evaluate without further understanding of the demographics of New Zealand esports players across amateur and professional play. Another opportunity for partnership was demonstrated by the finding that the facilities being used for esports practices or tournaments were largely non-sport facilities, pointing to an opportunity for recreation facilities to provide these spaces or perhaps work with operating esports places and spaces. Further investigation on the reasons for esports being played within non-sporting facilities, and opportunities for the industry could be undertaken. Support for esports players in New Zealand was noted as low and the opportunities for gaining the experience needed for overseas tournaments are smaller than other countries. The continued development of organisational structure and support by esports organisations may assist with these local challenges.

This research focused on a content analysis of publicly available documents and media discussing esports in New Zealand. Therefore, the majority of data analysed was found through search terms focused on discovering content with 'esport' or 'e-sport' included within the content. However, through the analysis phase, it was found that there are several materials that discuss both esports and videogames. It was not possible within the aims of this study to further investigate potential similarities or differences between how esports and videogames are discussed by the New Zealand public, journalists or organisations. Future research could build on the dataset created, searching for further videogame content and directly comparing the language used for esports and videogames. Further, future research could compare the findings of this study with a focused review of social media comments about esports to enable discussion about similarities or differences found.

Despite the efforts by esports advocates in recent years and the legitimacy provided to esports through the establishment of a national sporting body, this research found that esports is not yet accepted both as a recreational activity or as a sport in New Zealand and instead faces barriers to acceptance both in being defined as a sport and in its negative association to videogames. There remains a strong requirement from esports to justify its own existence and defend against criticisms, even criticisms which are well-documented as issues traditional sport has struggled with for many decades, confirming again the continued existence of the Great Sport Myth (GSM). Indeed, it was found that the comparison of esports to sports was the most frequently coded theme within articles which demonstrates that the public discourse, like esports literature, focuses strongly on this controversial subject. After comparing these polarising arguments in the New Zealand public discourse, both positive and negative, both for sports and esports, it was found that neither activity was 'good' or 'bad'; instead, both sports and esports include both positive and negative attributed outcomes for participants. It is suggested that the continual discourse on 'is esports a sport?", may

not be an argument that is useful for gaining social and political acceptance but rather focus on addressing the ethical criticisms that are commonly aimed at videogames, leaning on the already existing financial opportunities and large participation numbers. Unfortunately for esports advocates the comparison with sports is frequent and the belief that traditional sports are inherently 'good' remains strongly held in the New Zealand public discourse, leaving esports to battle on-going criticisms and scepticism, requiring them to continually justify the existence of the activity no matter how positive the outcome.

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