Community, Diversity and Visuality –

an ethno-case study on constructing identities and becoming legitimate participants in online/offline communities

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COMMUNITY, DIVERSITY AND VISUALITY

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Abstract

Since the launch of the first web browser, the early-nineties was dominated by a view of the Internet as a utopian space for identity play and community building. However online platforms are currently not utopian environments where people can be a anyone or anything they want. This thesis discusses how these online platforms continue to be shaped by the identity categories we inhabit in offline contexts. Here, I view identities as multiple yet parallel, somewhat stable but simultaneously renegotiated and changing with social context. Additionally, the focus is on what characterized the identities that the participants construct rather than the identity categories they inhabit. The overarching aim of the thesis is twofold: a) to explore what frames identity construction online and how the youth participants (co)construct identities on online platforms as well as b) to discuss methodological implications for employing screen recordings in an ethno-case study within educational research. The aim is approached through the following research questions:

RQ1. What frames the possibilities for identity construction online?
RQ2. How is the participant identity (co)construction shaped by these frames?
RQ3. What are the practical ethical challenges with employing ethnographic methods when conducting research on identity (co)construction online?

This thesis is a qualitative case study informed by ethnography, or an ethno-case study. Case study as a methodology focuses on an immersed understanding of a phenomenon trough a specific case and can offer insight into how previous research and empirical data are connected. Both case study and ethnography focus on a participant's perspective of a phenomenon and use varied forms of data collection. However, in ethnography, more emphasis is put on extended periods of time in the field and gaining insight into this phenomenon from multiple contexts, whereas a case study can be more limited in terms of time and researcher immersion into the field.

Here, the research questions are answered through insight into two cases. The first is ethnographic and thereby spanning a longer time period, with multiple sources of data and where research immersion spans both online and offline contexts. The second is framed as an ethno-case study and thereby employs ethnographic methods on a specific case yet is shorter in timespan than the first and where the data collection primarily focuses on the online context.

The first case, *Textmöten*, was an ethnographic research collaboration focusing on exploring how students in upper secondary schools in Finland

used mobile phones in school. The data consisted of video recordings of students during their school day, during lessons as well as breaks, and at the same time as there was a recording of their mobile phones. The application that allowed the mobile phones to be recorded was student controlled, and the students were thereby in control of the material being recorded. During a total of 18 days, the data was collected between the spring of 2015 to the autumn of 2016 at two different Swedish language upper secondary schools with a total of seven students (of age 16-18 at the time). In addition to the video recordings as well as the recordings of the mobile phones, five of the seven students were interviewed.

The second case, *esports in education*, was conducted in collaboration with a Swedish language vocational school with an esports programme in Finland in 2017-2018. The aim of the project was to explore online gaming through players that took their play seriously. Seven students (of age 17-18 at the time, all identifying as male) playing CS:GO took part in the study by sharing screen recordings of their in-game matches (ten matches and almost six hours in total) and by taking part in interviews (seven in total). The focus students volunteered to participate in the study through a teacher. The design of the study was dependent on the students' engagement due to the physical distance between the researchers and participants. Regular meetings, held at their school, functioned as interviews and were recorded.

The thesis focuses on three of the platforms the participants engaged with; Instagram, Tumblr (case 1) and Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (case 2). The results show that the participants identity (co)construction online was framed by both the platforms technical affordances as well as the online and offline communities they were part of. Additionally, their identity (co)construction was characterized by visuality, community and diversity. The practical ethical challenges revolved around maintaining participant integrity in terms of; a) gaining informed consent from players that became co-observed, b) defining privacy online during the analysis as well as in the published results and c) portraying participants accurately despite stakeholder interests.

Keywords: identities, identity construction, identity (co)construction, education, online, video games, social media, visuality, community, diversity

Abstrakt

Efter lanseringen av den första webbläsaren under tidigt 1990-tal rådde en utopistisk syn på internet som ett utrymme med stora möjligheter för skapandet av såväl identiteter som gemenskap. Trots det är samtida online-plattformar inte utopistiska miljöer där användaren kan bli vadhelst hen önskar. I den här avhandlingen diskuterar jag hur online-plattformar fortsättningsvis formas av offline-sammanhangens identitetskategorier. Här lyfter jag fram identiteter som plurala men parallella, någorlunda stabila men samtidigt omförhandlade och föränderliga i relation till den aktuella sociala kontexten. Fokus ligger snarare på vad som karaktäriserade de av deltagarna (sam)konstruerade identiteterna än de identitetskategorier deltagarna tillhör. Det övergripande syftet med avhandlingen är tudelat: a) att utforska vad som formar identitetskonstruktion online och hur de unga deltagarna (sam)-konstruerade identiteter online samt b) att diskutera de metodologiska implikationerna av att använda skärminspelningar i en etno-fallstudie inom pedagogisk forskning. Syftet besvaras genom följande forskningsfrågor:

RQ1. Vad ramar in möjligheterna för identitetskonstruktion online?
RQ2. Hur formar de här ramarna deltagarnas (sam)konstruerade identiteter?
RQ3. Vilka är de praktisk-etiska utmaningarna med att tillämpa etnografiska metoder i forskning om identitets(sam)konstruktion online?

Den här avhandlingen är en kvalitativ fallstudie informerad av etnografi, eller en etno-fallstudie. Fallstudiemetodologin lägger tyngdpunkt vid förståelse för ett fenomen genom specifika fall och kan erbjuda insyn i hur tidigare forskning samspelar med det empiriska data. Såväl inom fallstudie som etnografi ligger fokus på ett deltagarperspektiv av fenomenet som möjliggörs genom varierande former av datainsamling. Till skillnad från fallstudiemetodologi betonar etnografin som metodologi långvariga perioder på fältet och insyn i ett fenomen genom ett flertal kontexter.

Här besvaras forskningsfrågorna genom insyn i två fallstudier. Den första är etnografisk och inrymmer ett längre tidsspann med ett flertal typer av data på såväl online- som offlinekontexter. Den andra är en etno-fallstudie och inkluderar etnografiska metoder på ett specifikt fall, men är inte lika omfattande i fråga om tid och sammanhang som den först. Fokus i den andra fallstudien ligger i huvudsak på onlinekontexten.

Den första fallstudien, *Textmöten*, var ett etnografiskt forskningssamarbete med fokus på att undersöka hur gymnasiestuderande i Finland använder sina mobiltelefoner i skolan. Data består av videoinspelningar av studerande i deras skolvardag, under såväl lektioner som raster, samtidigt som deras mobiltelefonskärmar spelades in.

Programvaran som möjliggjorde skärminspelningen styrdes av deltagarna och de hade därför kontroll över det material som spelades in. Datainsamlingen skedde under totalt 18 dagar mellan våren 2015 till hösten 2016 vid två svenskspråkiga gymnasier med totalt sju studerande, då i åldern 16–18. Utöver inspelningarna hölls även ett antal intervjuer med fem av deltagarna.

Den andra fallstudien, *esport inom utbildning*, genomfördes 2017-2018 i samarbete med en svenskspråkig yrkesskola i Finland med ett esport-program. Syftet med studien var att undersöka spelande online genom deltagare med ett seriöst intresse för spelande. Sju studerande (då i åldern 17-18, samtliga identifierande som män) som spelade CS:GO deltog genom att dela skärminspelade matcher samt genom intervjuer. Data består av totalt tio matcher (totalt knappa sex timmar) samt intervjuer (totalt sju stycken). Deltagarna anmälde sitt intresse att fungera som fokuselever genom en lärare som var aktiv inom esport-programmet. På grund av det fysiska avståndet mellan forskare och deltagare var forskningsdesignen beroende av deltagaraktivitet. De regelbundna träffar som hölls på deltagarnas skola fugerade som intervjuer och ljudet spelades in.

Avhandlingen fokuserar på de tre online-plattformar där deltagarna var aktiva: Instagram och Tumblr (fallstudie 1) samt Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (fallstudie 2). Resultaten visar att deltagarnas (sam)konstruktion av identitet formades av såväl tekniska meningserbjudanden som de gemenskaper de var del av, både online och offline. Vidare formades deras identitets(sam)konstruktion av visualitet, gemenskap och mångfald. De praktisk-etiska utmaningarna som uppstod bestod av att upprätthålla deltagarnas integritet ifråga om a) informerat samtycke från spelare som blev medobserverade, b) att definiera privatliv online såväl i analysskedet som då resultaten publiceras samt c) att porträttera deltagarna så korrekt som möjligt trots intressegruppernas olika önskemål.

Nyckelord: identiteter, identitetskonstruktion, identitets(sam)-konstrukion, utbildning, online, digitala spel, sociala medier, visualitet, gemenskap, mångfald

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This thesis has beyond any doubt been the toughest grind of my life. The thaig of Academia is by far longer than the Deep Roads, more tedious than the hike up High Hrothgar and more difficult to maneuver than a Mako. But it has also been the best adventure of my life thus far! Not only do I have had the privilege to devote my life to something I am truly passionate about, but by doing so, I have met wonderful people and I would especially like to thank the following.

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The ones that drink prosecco with me as we celebrate even the slightest pebble of a milestone. Sofia Jusslin and Anna Widlund, my companions. For the sushi and cheese, laughter and tears. For a place where you are welcome

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2021, a foggy afternoon in October

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List of Original Publications

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Ståhl, M., & Kaihovirta, H. (2019). Exploring visual communication and competencies through interaction with images in social media. *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction, 21*, 250–266. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lcsi.2019.03.003

Study 2:

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Study 3:

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1. INTRODUCING IDENTITY

1. Introducing identity

Games are, and have been, an important part of my identity for most of my life. My first clear game-related memories are of playing the ridiculously difficult *Lion King* and *Aladdin* platform games for Windows 95. Often with my younger brother hanging over my shoulder giving commentary, as he would for years to come. I was the older sibling, and therefore it was natural I was the one dictating the terms for any kind of play. Being a boy or girl was irrelevant. Although we never played local co-op, playing digital games was definitely a shared experience. We came up with backstories for the purchases in the food store game that I can see before my eyes but simply cannot recall the name for. We considered which locations could be transformed into hotels in the *Spyro* series. We played *Pokemon Silver* and *Gold* in parallel, next to each other, talking about the Pokémon we liked the most.

Fast forward about ten years; I was a teenager and attending a private LAN-party where I believe they were playing *Counter-Strike*. At that time, I was mainly playing *Age of Empires II* on my own computer or *Call of Duty 2* on my brothers. However, I was not attending this LAN-party as a gamer, I was there as a girl. As girls, our primary task was to gossip in a corner and provide entertainment when the boys took a break from playing. I kept wishing that one of the boys would ask if I wanted to play, but I was too shy to initiate that myself. No one did, as none of them knew that I was into games. However, the cool boy asked one of the other girls if she wanted to have a go. She did and made a show out of not understanding how to operate the keyboard. I groaned internally; using the WASD-keys to move is hardly rocket science. The cool boy replied by making a show out of helping her and she giggly accepted his offer. I was then faced with the difficult question of how to behave if asked to play: should I play for real or 'as a girl'? The latter apparently included the flirty attention of the cool boy, and of course, that was something to consider.

Fast forward another ten years. I kept my gaming habits to myself through my teens, but after that I had the privilege of having boyfriends who did not mind me being a gamer. In fact, one of them bought me my first gaming console and RPG-game and for that I am forever grateful. As a teacher student, I 'came out' as a gamer when I presented the first draft of my bachelor's thesis on students' views on including video games in basic education. The attitudes among the female students ranged from mystified to condescending. This had to be a joke, as I, a somewhat feminine person who enjoyed a party, could not possibly be a gamer! By then I had met up with my cute neighbour for a coffee. I found out that when I was up late exploring Kirkwall, he was three floors upstairs raiding in Azeroth. The rest is history, or rather, herstory.

In video games, I have explored numerous narratives and identities. I have ventured into huge caves as well as space, I have fought with and against aliens and dragons, killed zombies as well as made them my friends. I have been the hero of Ferelden, Pathfinder, Sole Survivor, Captain of the Unreliable and Dovahkiin. I have taken the name of V, Shepard, Kyle Crane, Vella, Corvo Attano, Arthur Morgan and Hawke. I have had love affairs with aliens and pirates, knights and elfs, men and women. I have tried a multitude of identities and the only one that did not fit at all was the one of a criminal. I am utterly horrible at it; stealing from those poor hard-working NPCs...

It was somewhere in the intersection between these fictional narratives and my own I realized that I wanted to know more. How technology shapes our lives and who we are. How social norms can support or repress certain parts of us. How identities are constructed, online and offline.

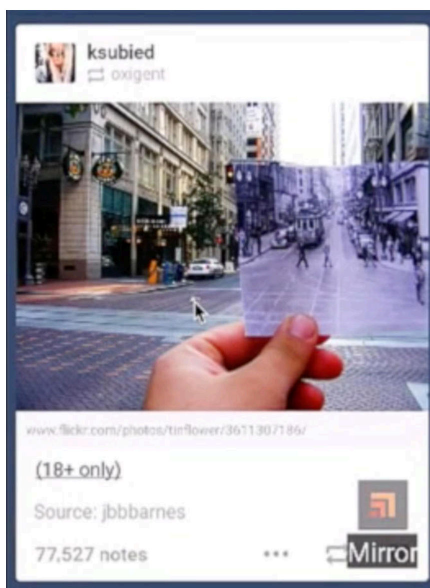
1.1 The thesis

Figure 1.

A landscape with sand coloured brick houses. Between the buildings, there is a slight view of what appears to be a blue sky. The sun is casting shadows on the paved ground in the alley. There are numerous walls, but few windows. The landscape contains some objects, like a decorative wall light and a flowerpot. In the distance, there is a partial view of an antenna of some sort. There are no people in the image, apart from a gloved hand holding a weapon. The weapon is covered in red, blue, white and black shapes and stripes. The scope is pointing down the alley.

Another image of buildings, growing tall beyond our view. The ground is once again paved, however there is neither dust nor sand in sight. On the building closest to the photographer, there are two identical signs, signalling that in the building is a hotel. The building appears to be constructed by large bricks, however the wall on the ground floor is dominated by large windows. On the sidewalk outside of the building is some garbage cans and a parked white car. On the lower right part of the image is a hand, holding a photograph of what appears to be the same street on top of the same view. The photography is black and white, suggesting that the view is dated.

Figure 2.



However, these images offer much more information than I have provided so far. They are screenshots from the multiplayer video game *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* and the social media platform *Tumblr*. They are more than static images, because someone chose to interact with them, and that interaction is situated online. These images can be viewed as fragments of activities taking place online within certain communities. In the first image, the player is the middle of an online gaming session where the opposition is currently in the lead. Out of the five players in the team, only two are left in this round; including the player in question. The player is in a location called Palace Alley and the other currently active team member is to their right. In the second image, we see that this photo was originally posted on Flickr. Since posted on Tumblr, a number of people have interacted with it. In fact, this image has been interacted with 77 527

times, including two specific reblogs. These reblogs led this image to appear in this particular view and thereby in this person's feed, where it is seen, liked and then reblogged from their account for someone else to see.

Why engage in this interaction, with a community, facilitated through an online platform? How is this activity shaped by the community as well the platform? With Moroccan architecture and a street view of Oregon, Portland, these images are indeed anchored to a physical place. But the interaction takes place online, while the people interacting with them are physically located in Finland. Further, both of these people were students at the time. How does this online interaction affect and how is it affected by their offline communities, in this case, their respective schools? And what does this interaction say about these people's self-expression online? What to make of the play with contemporary and historical photography? What significance has the coloured weapon with a pinup sticker attached to it? What is the significance of a visual format? And can anyone who wants to take part in this activity, or is it limited to a select few?

These are the questions that have guided me throughout this process and that I, through this thesis, provide one answer to.

1.2 Identity (co)construction online/offline

Since the launch of the first web browser, Netscape Navigator in 1995, the early-nineties was dominated by a view of the Internet as a utopian space for identity play and community building (Nakamura, 2007). Many scholars envisioned what changes might occur, and of them was Sherry Turkle (1995) who interviewed those who frequented early text-based forums. By now quiet famously, one of her respondents claimed that "Real Life is just one more window and it's usually not my best" (Turkle, 1995, p.13). However, as Nakamura (2007) noted, online platforms were not and are not utopian environments where people can be anyone or anything they want to be. These platforms continue to be shaped by the identity categories we inhabit in offline contexts.

How can we then understand contemporary identity and how it is expressed on platforms where online and offline communities are intertwined? Erik Erikson (1968) coined the term of identity but expressed that it is a concept difficult to define. However, he noted the pervasiveness and yet the somewhat shifting nature of identity in various contexts. In her autobiography and quest to understanding identity, Susan Faludi (2016) adds to the works of Erikson (1968) by describing identity as a "hall of mirrors". In one of her later works, Turkle (2011) questions the view of identity as sameness. She rather advocates that person has multiple identities, where "people feel 'whole' not because they are *one* but because the relationships among aspects of self are fluid" and that we "feel 'ourselves' if we can move easily among our many aspects of self" (Turkle,

2011, p. 194, cursive original). In a volume on identity and discourse in a mediatized world, edited by Yusuf Kalyango and Monika Weronika Kopytowska (2014), the different studies including perspectives from more than 20 countries refer to identities, not as static, but as shifting and changing. Identities need to have a certain amount of stability, otherwise they tend to lose their social function (Chilton, 2014). However, identities are continually (re)negotiated and constructed in social contexts (Banjeree & German, 2014).

Erving Goffman (1959) differentiates between the private person one is backstage and what is presented on a stage. He describes this as impression management of self-presentation, which can be done both verbally and nonverbally. David Shulman (2017) notes that employing Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theories as analytical frameworks can be challenging due to their analogical nature. Further, Shulman states that contemporary impression management online is shaped by more flexible timeframes and multiple front stages. I do agree with Shulman's (2017) claim that the front stage as a concept can help demonstrate the norms and values that are currently seen as the ideal in contemporary society. However, at the core of Goffman´s theory, and then echoed by Shulman (2017) is the assumption of the backstage identity is inherently the true identity. For example, in relation to creating different profiles online, Shulman (2017, p. 226, my cursive) claims that such profiles each have "different degrees of *accuracy*", thereby indicating that the backstage identity is offline. A similar stance is presented by Arfini et al (2021), as they note that online platforms has the affordance to construct identities that would not be possible for a person to construct in offline contexts. However, they argue that the online identities are merely an extension of offline identities. Neither Goffman (1959) through Shulman (2017) nor Arfini et al (2021) acknowledge that to some, like the respondent in Turkle´s study (1995), online identities have equal or even higher relevance than offline identities. Therefore, while I occasionally borrow the vocabulary of Goffman(1959) and Arfini et al (2021), to express the tools employed in identity construction, I do not use these works on identity and self-representation as an analytical framework in this thesis.

James Paul Gee (2000) notes that while identity is a highly relevant tool for understanding both education and society, it is also a term that includes multiple definitions. Thereby, Gee (2000, p. 99) differentiates between a person's 'core identity' "that holds more uniformly, for ourselves and others, across contexts" and the contextually situated identities connected to this performance. Further, he offers four ways to view identity and organises them according to how they are constructed and in relation to what. The first is identity as a form of state shaped by nature, such as being white. The second is identity as a form of position authorized by an institution, such as being a student. The third is identity as a trait as it is

recognized through interaction with others, such as being humorous. The fourth is identity as a shared experience based on the practice within a community (or to use Gee's terminology, affinity group), such as being a gamer. These categories are according to Gee not to be seen as separate identities, but as a way to understand identities from different perspectives. Here, my focus is on the latter two, however, as they are affected by the first two, all levels are in a sense present in this thesis.

These theories, taken together, form a view of identities as multiple yet parallel, somewhat stable but simultaneously renegotiated and changing with social context. Further, in an interview in the Dystopia podcast and their episode on identity politics (Hariz et al, 2020), professor Jonna Bornemark notes that while identity as concept focuses on individuality, we as humans tend to describe ourselves not by our uniqueness but as the groups we are part of. This comment opened my eyes to the duality embedded in the concept of identity. Further, in her work on gender and sexuality within game culture, Adrianne Shaw (2014), distinguishes between *identities* and *identifiers*. Shaw notes that while identification as a concept is important for how people see themselves, identifying with characters in games is not as straightforward as a female player automatically identifying with female characters. Thereby, sharing an identifier such as gender, is not necessarily enough for identification to happen. I extend on this distinction to another context, as here, the analytical focus is on the identities the participants construct rather than the identifiers or identity categories they inhabit. To continue on Bornemark's (2020) statement, I focus on how the participants as individuals try to communicate their uniqueness rather than solely focus on their identity categories.

The concept I use, identity (co)construction, thereby entails a view on identities as plural and changing. By placing the prefix within brackets, I do not claim that identity construction is not collective. Rather, based on the participants activity within the data, I claim that the collective construction of identities can be seen as a continuum of being more or less explicitly negotiated. Correspondingly, I employ the term identity (co)construction. Additionally, these identities are also contextually situated and affected by norms and values from each community. While identity categories such as gender, race, ethnicity or sexuality is not my analytical focus, these categories were made relevant by norms in the online and offline communities the participants engage with. As we will see, the norms and ideals of offline society is highly pervasive and have a clear impact on the identities one can construct online.

1.3 The contexts: offline

This thesis is a qualitative case study informed by ethnography, or an ethno-case study (Parker-Jenkins, 2018). Case study as a methodology focuses on an immersed understanding of a phenomenon through a specific case or cases (Scwandt & Gates, 2018). By researching the activities conducted by an individual or a group, case studies can offer insight into how previous research and the empirical data are connected (Cohen et al, 2005). The distinction between ethnography and case study as methodologies can be blurry since they are somewhat overlapping. Both focus on a participant's perspective of a phenomenon and use varied forms of data collection. However, in ethnography, more emphasis is put on extended periods of time in the field and gaining insight into this phenomenon from multiple contexts, whereas a case study can be more limited in terms of time and researcher immersion into the field (Parker-Jenkins, 2018). This thesis includes two projects or cases, where the first is ethnographic and thereby spanning a longer period of time, with multiple sources of data and where research immersion spans both online and offline contexts. The second is framed as an ethno-case study and thereby employs ethnographic methods on a specific case yet is shorter in timespan than the first and where the data collection primarily focuses on the online context. However, both cases provide insight into both offline and online contexts.

The first case, *Textmöten*, was an ethnographic research collaboration focusing on exploring how students in upper secondary schools in Finland used mobile phones in school. The data consisted of video recordings of seven students during their school day, during lessons as well as breaks, and at the same time as there was a recording done of their mobile phones. The application that allowed the mobile phones to be recorded was student controlled and the students were therefore in control of the data collection. A total of 18 days the data was collected between the spring of 2015 to the autumn of 2016 at two different Swedish language upper secondary schools with a total of seven students (of age 16-18 at the time). The participating students were chosen within the group of students expressing an interest to be part of the study, following an initial visit to the project schools. In addition to the video recordings as well as the recordings of the mobile phones, there were interviews made with five of the seven students. During the interviews, the students were shown excerpts of data to facilitate a discussion of their point of view on the material. These video-stimulated recall interviews (Nguyen, McFadden, Tangen & Beutel, 2013) enabled a deeper discussion of their mobile phone use in school, and provided the researchers with a substantially richer understanding of the recorded material.

The second case, *esports in education*, was conducted in collaboration with a Swedish language vocational school with an esports programme in Finland in 2017-2018. The aim of the project was to explore online gaming through players that took playing video games seriously. Seven students (of age 17-18 at the time, all identifying as male) playing Counter-Strike: Global Offensive took part in the study by sharing screen recordings of their in-game matches (ten matches and almost six hours in total) and by taking part in interviews (seven in total). The focus students volunteered to participate in the study through a teacher. The design of the study was dependent on the students' engagement due to the physical distance between the researchers and participants. Regular meetings, held at their school, functioned as interviews and were recorded. Stimulated recall (Nguyen et al, 2013; Pitkänen, 2015) on relevant sequences from the screen recordings was employed during all interviews apart from the first, thereby providing the researcher with the participants' thoughts and comments on certain in-game situations. Further, as these interviews took place in the participants' school, this provided further researcher immersion into the participants' everyday lives.

1.4 The contexts: online

The identity construction discussed in this thesis takes place on three different online platforms; *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (henceforth CS:GO), *Instagram* and *Tumblr*. The platforms in question were not in either case selected by the researchers involved, but they were the platforms the voluntary participants engaged with (this is further discussed in the chapter on methodology, see chapter 5). These three platforms had at the time and still do have millions of users and none is specific to a Finnish context.

Both CS:GO and Instagram are very popular on a national as well as international level. The game series Counter-Strike remains popular in Finland; listed seventh among the most popular digital games in the Finnish Player Barometer in 2018 and fifth in 2020 (Kinnunen et al, 2018; Kinnunen et al, 2020). In a survey conducted by DNA Oyj (a Finnish telecommunications group that provides voice, data and TV services) Instagram was among the top five most used social media platforms in Finland in 2020 (DNA Oyj, 2020). Based on viewership and prize pools of 2019 and 2020, CS:GO was listed as the second most popular esports game in 2020 on a global scale (Ramsey, 2020). According to Statista (2020), based on monthly active users, Instagram is sixth place on most used social media platforms worldwide. However, Instagram does not provide monthly active users (MAU), and therefore the data was based on third party reports. While Instagram and Tumblr are both image-centred social media platforms (Tiidenberg & Gómez Cruz, 2020), Tumblr was neither

mentioned in the national (DNA Oyj, 2020) nor internal rapport (Statista, 2020). However, with 642 million unique monthly visitors in 2018, it is listed as one of the 21 social media platforms to consider for marketing purposes (Lua, 2018). Based on respective popularity, CS:GO and Instagram are therefore comparable within their respective category while Tumblr is the least popular platform in this study. However, as will be discussed later, the intention behind Tumblr is not necessarily to attract a mainstream audience and therefore the lower user rates are hardly surprising.

The first-person shooter (FPS) game genre is popular in Finland (Kinnunen, Taskinen & Mäyrä, 2020). Similarly, Cwil and Howe (2021) noted that it is the most popular genre among players in the United States and Poland as well. FPS continues to be one of the main genres within esports on a global scale. Players of FPSs claim to prefer the genre due to its fast pace, competitiveness and the need for precise and quick reactions (Toth, Conroy & Campbell, 2021). CS:GO is based on *Counter-Strike,* henceforth CS, (Valve Corporation, 2000); a game that was originally a mod for *Half-Life* (Sierra Entertainment & Valve Corporation, 1998). The organized competitive culture that emerged around the original CS game (2000) transformed an individual pastime activity into something professional with a focus on teamplay (Rambusch et al, 2007). The interest for esports is growing in Finland; in 2018, only 1.8 percent claimed to play in an esports setting and the corresponding number in 2020 was 2.8 percent (Kinnunen et al, 2018; Kinnunen et al, 2020). Further, there is a statistically significant increase in those who view esports occasionally: from 15.3 percent in 2018 to 19.6 percent in 2020. While not the focus in this thesis, it is noteworthy that the interest in gambling (playing with money) is currently decreasing in Finland (Kinnunen et al, 2020) and in a four-country comparison, Finnish youth were the most sceptical towards gambling (in comparison with youth in the United States, South Korea and Spain; see Sirola, Kaakinen, Savolainen, Paek, Zych & Oksanen, 2021).

Instagram is currently one of the most important social networking sites on a global scale and has iterated its features over the years, such as videos in 2013 and stories in 2016 (Caliandro & Graham, 2020). Instagram's global popularity has shaped the role of photographs and photography in contemporary visual culture, as the platform encourages sharing amateur photos of mundane situations of everyday life captured in the moment (Manovich, 2017; Caliandro & Graham, 2020). However, Instagram is not solely a platform for production of images, it is also a camera, a photo album, a source of information and "medium of expression and construction for the individual self and as part of a community" (Lopez Zamora, 2018, p. 520). Further, it is also a venue for advertising (Xin Teo et al, 2019) where digital influencers; a new form of celebrity, that from a marketing perspective, can become brand ambassadors with their constant streams of communication (de Brito Silva et al, 2020).

Tumblr was created in 2007 by David Karp as an easy to-use-multimedia microblogging social media platform (McCracken, Cho, Stein & Neill Hoch, 2020). Tumblr is somewhat different from other social media platforms as the design focus is on content and certain topics rather than connecting with other users. However, Proferes & Morrissey (2020) noted that Tumblr users do experience community due to Tumblr being a venue for creating and consuming content while interacting with other users that share their interests. There is a variety of content available on Tumblr: texts, images, GIFs, audio, video and embedded content from other platforms. Metadata on when a post was created is noted by Tumblr but there are no timestamps visible to users. Therefore, posts appear as a stream of seemingly endless amounts of content on the dashboard, which is the key feature of Tumblr. In theory, all posts on Tumblr are public, but it is easy for a particular post to be lost in the crowd. For example, different time zones can affect where a post is placed within the infinite amount of content. In comparison to highly popular social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, Tumblr as a platform is not based on offline identities but on pseudonymity (anonymity through pseudonyms), which tends to attract those marginalised within society (McCracken et al, 2020). This is further discussed in 4.1 regarding diversity in social media. In terms of interaction, Tumblr offers five primary tools: posting, following, messaging, liking and reblogging (Proferes & Morrissey, 2020). In fact, Tumblr is credited as the first social media platform to offer the reblog function. In general, user-to-user interaction is often brief as the usage of Tumblr tends to more of a broadcasting network.

1.5 Aim, research questions and the structure of the thesis

The overarching aim of the thesis is twofold: a) to explore what frames identity construction online and how the youth participants (co)construct identities on online platforms as well as b) to discuss methodological implications for employing screen recordings in an ethno-case study within educational research. The aim is approached through the following research questions:

RQ1. What frame the possibilities for identity construction online?
RQ2. How is the participant identity (co)construction shaped by these frames?
RQ3. What are the practical ethical challenges with employing ethnographic methods when conducting research on identity (co)construction online?

In table 1, the research questions are presented with the corresponding case and, thereby data, that the discussion is based upon. Further, the table also presents what data is analysed in which study to provide answers the respective research questions. Note that in terms of case 1 and RQ3, study 3 is within brackets. This is to signal that while no data from case 1 is directly analysed in study 3, the research design of case 1 clearly informed the design of case 2. As RQ3 is focused on practical ethical, and thereby methodological, challenges within study 3, the discussion is thereby by extension also relevant in relation to case 1.

Table 1.
The relation between research questions, cases and respective studies.

	Case 1: Textmöten	Case 2: esports in education
RQ1	Study 1	Study 2
RQ2	Study 1	Study 2
RQ3	(Study 3)	Study 3

These summary chapters link the three studies together. Previous research and relevant theoretical frameworks are discussed in chapters 2-4 covering visuality, community and diversity. In chapter 5, I discuss ethno-case study as a methodology and chapter 6 function as a summary of the three research papers. The final chapter, chapter 7, discusses the thesis as a whole and provides some implications.

2. CONTEMPORARY VISUALITY

2. Contemporary visuality

Visual information is surrounding us; from the obvious examples of brightly coloured advertisements to everyday life symbols such as an octagonal red sign signalling us to stop (Fahmy, Bock & Wanta, 2014). Contemporary society can be seen as bombardment by images, where images are the most common way to spread information and make an impact. However, behind every image is a person creating it and seeing is more than a biological ability, it is shaped by cultural processes (Becker, 2004). Visual literacy entails understanding these processes and the ability to recognize that an image was created to evoke a certain reaction. Further, it also the ability to consider the different interpretations an image might evoke depending on viewer and context (Famhy et al, 2014).

Contemporary visuality is also expressing oneself and potentially influencing others and this so called 'new' culture of visual display is tightly connected with the development of information technology. While some see this flow of images as an organic and equal way of presenting information, there are those who consider it a threat towards more traditional forms of literacy (Becker, 2004). There appears to be two primary forms of critique against a society focused on images. The first is of "the presumed 'power of images' and fear of their influence" (Becker, 2004, p. 149), where topics such as the effects of advertising and violent imagery in for example news and video games can result in moral panic (see e.g. Van Rooij et el, 2018). The second is focused on how the new technologies raise questions of authorship, resulting in conflicts over photographs, for further discussion, see section 7.2.

Longstreet, Valachic and Wells (2021) noted that in the early days of website development, visual aesthetics tended to be considered irrelevant at best and potentially distracting from the purpose of the website at worst. Further, they argue that while we have become more aware of the relevance of visuality in online there is no consensus on what visuality online entails. However, while visuality aimed research interest resulting in a "pictorial turn" in the early 1990's (Michell, 1994), studies of visual culture are not a unified field. According to Becker (2004) this is due to a lack of a common paradigm and therefore lively debates on exactly what the focus in visual culture is. There is a dissonance between those that study visual *culture*, focusing on the high level of visuality in contemporary culture, and those focused on *visual* culture, with an effort of separating expressions of visual culture from other cultural forms. The first can be too broad to be feasible, while the latter can be too narrow to be of relevance. At the same time, the focus on the exclusively visual can be considered problematic as almost all forms of culture or media have visual aspects and therefore a concept such as visual media would include almost all media (Mitchell, 1994).

Accordingly, based on Bal (2003), Becker (2004) suggests an approach to visual studies that is more specific than "things we can see". Further, describing any culture as visual can be misleading, since no culture is solely visual and simultaneously, all cultures have visual aspects. Additionally, Becker (2004, p. 151) claims that visual culture instead should be used to describe "a particular relationship between seeing and knowledge". Then the images themselves are not a visual culture, but artefacts within a visual culture. The objects that are worthy of analysis are then the artefacts that through seeing become constructed as meaningful. The relevant artefacts of this thesis are accordingly the ones that the participants engage within their respective visual online cultures: social media and video games.

2.1 Social media and contemporary visuality

Instagram and Tumblr are both image-centred social media platforms (Tiidenberg & Gómez Cruz, 2020). As Instagram is currently one of the most popular social media platforms on a global scale (Statista, 2020), it can be considered a platform for "mainstream culture". While Tumblr has a global presence, it does appeal to a more limited group of users and can therefore be considered a more underground type of social media platform (The-Cimmerans, 2020).

Barthes (1981) noted that photographs differ from all other forms of visual expression in one regard: the irrefutable fact that the photographer was there. The object in a photograph is not a memory, nor a fantasy, and it represents the actual time and place where the photograph was taken. Using today's technology, it is possible to circumvent this by using for example drones or security cameras one can operate at a distance. However, drones can only move within a certain range from their operator and someone needed to place the security camera there in the first place. Accordingly, Barthes' claim (1981, p.85) that a photograph is a certificate of presence still has bearing, even if certain circumstances might need to be considered.

The selfie takes the certificate of presence to another level as the photographer functions as an object documented simultaneously as they take the photo (Frosh, 2015). Selfie (word of the year in 2013 by the Oxford English Dictionary) is a self-portrait from arm's length or by using an extension (such as a stand or 'selfie stick') or a reflective surface (such as a mirror). Posting selfies can provide reassurance through interactions, such as likes and comments, from others (Tiidenberg & Gómez Cruz, 2015). There is a growing scholarship on selfies; ranging from framing selfies as self-expression and exploration (Tiidenberg, 2020) to a potentially oppressive reinforcement of consumerism as well as of hetero- and body-normative discourses (Cox, 2007; Schwarz, 2010). It is however worthy of note that "for all its zeitgeisty appeal, the selfie is in fact a niche

phenomenon in the larger context of Instagram genres" (Caliandro & Graham, 2020, p.1). On the other hand, Tiidenberg and Gómez Cruz (2015) noted that as part of a body-positive atmosphere, selfies can inspire new ways of looking at bodies in general. In a visual economy where, certain bodies create monetary gain, sharing not for profit amateur selfies of various bodies can be seen as transgressive.

Instagram's global popularity has shaped the role of photographs and photography in contemporary visual culture, as the platform encourages sharing amateur photos of mundane situations of everyday life captured in the moment (Caliandro & Graham, 2020). However, Instagram is not solely a platform for production of images, it is also a camera, a photo album, a source of information and "medium of expression and construction for the individual self and as part of a community" (Lopez Zamora, 2018, p. 520). Further, it is also a venue for advertising. In a study on marketing on Instagram, Xin Teo et al (2019) noted that image quality was essential: an image of high visual quality made the participants more likely to perceive the product to be of high quality and thereby reported higher levels of purchase intention.

In his book on Instagram and the contemporary image, Lev Manovich (2017) discusses photography and meaning-making from a user perspective. As a globally used application for mobile photography capturing "ordinary lives", Manovich (2016) argued that Instagram is the ultimate tool to study contemporary popular photography. While Instagram can be used for both networking and marketing, Manovich claims that the majority of users primarily use the application as documentation and for communicating with people they already know from an offline context. The content that they share is primarily of relevance to the user, their friends, family and/or circle of acquaintances. These users do not solely share their best photos and while they do enjoy many likes on their photos, these photos are primarily not shared in order to increase the user's number of followers. Manovich (2016) noted three types of photos on Instagram: casual, professional and designed. *Casual photos* are visual documentation of everyday life, and become a shared experience of a certain situation, often capturing the people that attended. Documenting everyday life has been a part of photography since its beginning, increasing as the equipment became more accessible and affordable. However, Instagram has further intensified this documentation as the interface shows the date and time for each photo, as well as potentially tagging both place and other Instagram users. This echoes Barthes (1988) notion of the photograph as a certificate of presence, and taking it further.

Both professional and designed photos can be considered "competitive photography", a term introduced by Alise Tifentale in 2016 for "photos competing for likes, comments, followers and engagement" (Lopez Zamora, 2018, p. 522). Further, both categories are done by photographers with

awareness of the “rules of good photography”; the social conventions that dictate what signals a good quality photograph (Manovich, 2017). Among these markers of quality are for example the “rule of thirds”, proper levels of exposure that show details in the shadows, and balanced colours without any tint colour dominating. Accordingly, classical photography is highly focused on photo-realism, with realistic lighting and colour schemes. The distinction between *professional* and designed photographs on Instagram is that while the first abide by these rules, the latter does not always do so. Rejecting or bending these rules for ‘good photography’ is in itself not new, as art photographers have also explored the ‘snapshot aesthetic’. However, as these conventions were established before Instagram was created, *designed photos*, to various extent, adhere to other rules than the classic aesthetics. For example, a traditional self-portrait or selfie is often taken with the object in the centre of the photo. However, a designed photograph might simply favour a body part such as a hand or a foot, yet always in a specific situation, such as waking up or having a relaxing coffee break. While depth is central in classic photography, these photos are often designed to look flat or two-dimensional. The Instagram users publishing designed photos wish to be more contemporary, portraying urban and/or hipster lifestyle choices to their peers. These photos are characterized by both visual characteristics, such as colour use highly differing from a photo-realism, to certain values that are integrated in this style of photography, such as consumer minimalism.

Further, Manovich noted two types of Instagram creators in terms of sequentially. The first are those to control the visual characteristics of each individual photo, but do not arrange them in a particular way in regard to each other. When viewing a specific profile, the owner’s latest images are presented in a grid of nine images, three times three. Accordingly, the first group either does not reflect on the combination of these images or does reflect upon this but still chooses to post images that might ‘clash’. The second is those who have a vision for their Instagram account as a whole and where the individual photos are posted in a certain sequence to match that vision, where no matter “how interesting a particular photo is, the author does not post it if it breaks the established rhythm and theme” (Manovich, 2017, p.129). This theme can be a number of visual expressions; drawings, colourful and bright photos, black and white photos, however, Instagram users of the second type dedicate their account to one such aesthetic. It does not mean they recreate the same image, but rather that the account has a basic theme that inspires further photographs to make a chain of related content. Manovich noted that those who post designed photos with a certain sequence in mind, can currently be considered the professionals of Instagram. These content creators do not adhere to the classical rules of ‘good’ photography, but use the technology at their

disposal; including the “properties, affordances, advantages and limitations of the medium Instagram” (Manovich, 2016, p. 130).

Manovich (2017) further referred to these content creators and the photos they publish as *Instagramism*, as an analogy to modern art movements such as surrealism, futurism and so on, as Instagramism offers a vision of the world and the corresponding visual language. A term often used is an “aesthetic”, which is a consistent theme: both in terms of photography, editing and content in images presented together. According to Manovich (2017), Instagramism is not a form of subculture, as it is not necessarily connected to socio-economic background. Neither does he see Instagramism as a resistance towards the mainstream, but rather a co-existence with it. However, as he also points out, mainstream commercial culture is often appropriated from smaller subcultures. Further, in his commentary to Manovich's book, Lopez Zamora (2018) note that by the huge amounts of images currently posted on Instagram and the endeavour of creating a pleasing aesthetic within the realms of Instagramism, it is possible to get lost in an almost infinite re-iteration of that aesthetic.

Tumblr has been a platform for identity construction for years; through the art created, the critique, and the networks, support and resources shared among the users (McCracken et al, 2020). However, echoing Cho (2015), Proferes & Morrissey, 2020 argue that the focus on Tumblr is rather on curation than creation. While there are multiple forms of content on Tumblr ranging from text sections to photos and GIFs, the platform does have a visual emphasis (McCracken et al, 2020). One example of such posts are mood boards consisting of nine square shaped images in a grid and referred to as #myAesthetic. However, these are often more than a beautiful collage, as the user can employ such mood boards to discover themselves and share a certain stance or identity through an accessible format. Further, even content that appears to be merely decorative is often influenced by or connected to a political stance. After all, a photograph is not an objective copy of reality, but rather a subjectively captured section of reality (Barthes, 1981). One such example is referred to as Tumblr Pink or pale blogs; blogs on Tumblr that reflect a certain muted aesthetic, often including a limited colour scheme and muted shades of pink (Goding-Doty, 2020). While these bloggers claim to be apolitical, such content strengthen the association between beauty, ethereality and #pale, and thereby white hegemony. Similarly, if music elements are part of these blogs, the music tends to be ‘muted’: melancholic or suggestive. Landscapes are often featured in a similarly muted palette, without identifying traits, and where public places tend to be devoid of people. Thereby the places become almost interchangeable and even ‘non-places’. Goding-Doty (2020) makes a comparison to European settlers and their view on virgin territory: a no man's land ripe for the taking, ignoring the existing non-white population.

Western consumerism and the corresponding visual tradition can be either reproduced or rejected in selfie practices, and accordingly shape both the possibilities and limitations of how bodies are perceived (Tiidenberg & Gómez Cruz, 2015). Echoing the work of Markula (2004), in his turn echoing Foucalt (1988), Tiidenberg and Gómez Cruz (2015) argued that selfies have the potential to become transgressive self-inventions when the person is critically self-aware. Prior to the changes in 2017, Tumblr was a fairly tolerant platform for so called NSFW, not safe for work, content. The platform handed over the responsibility for filtering such content to the users; both to those who posted such content to use the correct tags and the users to filter the tags they did and did not want to access. One example of such content was so-called 'sexy selfies' or nudes. The first term is employed by users regarding their own images while the second term is used for other peoples (semi)naked photos. While the "knee-jerk reaction" to sexy selfies might be that they are an expression of vanity, Tiidenberg (2020, p.147) argue that they can be an empowering and meaningful way to communicate self-expression and/or transformation. While the consumer culture profits from body insecurity, these users are, by sharing and reblogging photos of non-normative bodies, taking a stance against "heteronormative, ageist, sizeist, sexist, ableist, and racist standards" (Tiidenberg, 2020, p. 148). In a society where body angst is highly present, safe platforms for body positivity can provide users with a broader view of what bodies look like and thereby a new way of seeing bodies. For example, as will be discussed in more detail in 4.1, selfies were utilized to challenge racism and reclaim #Latina (Rauber Rodriguez, 2020).

Black users of Tumblr are currently questioning the white, and more specifically, multiracial ideal of beauty (Calhoun, 2020). Black users that are found attractive are often asked what "they're mixed with" and children with black and Asian parents are found as exceptionally cute. While a 'biracial aesthetic' can be considered accepting from a multicultural perspective, underlying such comments a monoracial ideal can be seen, implying that being black is not attractive on its own. Such comments are not only uttered by non-black people, but also by black men fetishizing light-skinned black women or elder relatives advocating having children with lighter skinned black people to avoid 'tar babies' (Calhoun, 2020). However, criticism towards white norms of beauty is not unique to Tumblr but also takes place on other social media platforms. For example, Canella (2020) analysed the images of black women posted on Facebook as a conscious effort to proclaim #BlackIsBeautiful. Another example is the massive amounts of black squares posted on Instagram in early June 2020 with the #BlackOutTuesday where many users voluntarily 'silenced' their accounts for a day. This was done in support of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, yet by using another hashtag so that the information and art shared would not be drowned in black boxes of support (Coscarelli, 2020).

Based on her work among youth in Australia, Hendry (2020) noticed that her fellow researcher had a limited perspective of how youth expressed mental illness (the term preferred by the participants) on Tumblr. The academic discourse was preoccupied by images normalizing or even reinforcing tendencies for self-harm and the discussions focused on whether Tumblr was harmful or beneficial for mental health. Hendry noted that such questions echoed previous debates on other platforms and websites, often resulting in a skewed image of media as harmful or even contagious. Further, while she noted that these studies were motivated by efforts to prevent mental illness, analysing decontextualized images is not necessarily the best approach. In order to understand how youth express mental illness online, one should focus on the users and the platforms they prefer. The content that concerns mental illness as well as emotional distress and relief are more complex and ambiguous than what is visible through a simple content analysis. For example, one of the participants in her in-depth interviews, explained that to her, Tumblr was a place to "collect and reblog images that made her feel less anxious and more connected to a larger group" (Hendry, 2020, p. 322). For the participant, Tumblr was a place where she could share images that affirmed her current mood. These images were rarely hash tagged or captioned with words related to mental illness and would therefore be unlikely to be found through content analysis or data mining searchers. The participant did not directly interact with anyone on Tumblr; she enjoyed being part of a community without actively having to talk to people. The participants in Hendry's (2020) study expressed relief regarding the limited visibility on Tumblr. Other social media platforms created pressure and frustration due to user visibility, being identified and thereby being accountable for the activities on these platforms. Hendry (2020) advocates user-based approach to understanding social media. Especially so in the case of mental illness, as it is stigmatized and research on the topic can be coloured by research biases.

2.2 Video games and contemporary visuality

While visual aspects of a game or "video game graphics" is often discussed by the audience (see e.g. Johnson, 2019), there is limited academic discourse on the topic. This becomes especially apparent in comparison to the body of academic texts on visuality in social media, which the previous section provided a glimpse into. Using the Åbo Akademi University library search engine for digital papers (search done on the 29 of January 2021), 'social media' and 'visuality' resulted in 12 596 hits, whereas the corresponding number for video games was only 2 465. The limited academic discourse on visual aspects of video games tend to focus on game design and visual aspects of that process (see e.g. Salen, Tekinbas &

Zimmerman, 2006). Further, the research on visuality from a player perspective is both limited and narrow in scope, as the existing research appears to be focused not on the in-game experience as a whole, but on player representation and avatars.

Unlike most other media forms, video games can offer the player the opportunity to create their own character (the visual representation of the player in-game), choose dialogue options affecting the game narrative as well as make moral choices through this character (Gee, 2003). However, Shaw (2014) argues that the term cannot be employed to all games as avatar implies self-representation, and some playable characters are set and therefore does not necessarily represent the player. Among the playable characters, cis male characters are continuously in the majority, see for example the Call of Duty-series (as noted by Blackburn, 2018) as well as Grand theft auto V (as noted by Moody, 2018). Game designer Brenda Romero (2019) referred to this phenomenon as the mirror effect, where the game designer creates a protagonist similar to what they see in the mirror.

Representation among avatars is a well-discussed issue within game research, where the most (in)famous example being Lara Croft, the protagonist in the Tomb Raider-series (Kennedy, 2002). With her key visual attributes being an ever-increasing breast size and revealing clothing (Shaw, 2014), she functions as a clear example of being eye-candy for an assumed male audience, or the male gaze. The analytical framework coined by Mulvey (1975) highlights how "visual media presumes a heterosexual, masculine-identified viewer" (Jennings, 2018, p. 235). Similarly, Roy and Deshbandhu (2020) noted that the male gaze shapes the experience of play on Zapak.com, India´s most popular web portal for games. As they offer the player the option to dress and undress white women, games under the category 'Girl's games' become venues not only for sexism but also for performances of postcolonial masculinity. In Tomb Raider, certain cutscenes appear to result in "identification - not with Lara - but with the man reflected in her glasses'' (Meija & LeSavoy, 2018, p. 93) as "marketing logics assume that a strong woman is not a character with which male players could connect" (Shaw, 2014, p. 61). In a study on character identification within a sexist game, Sarda et al (2021) noted that identifying with the male character resulted in self-masculinity associations for both men and women. Echoing the works of Bandura (1978), they further noted that identification with the male character, regardless of player gender, can have been facilitated by the character being perceived as attractive. It is worth noting that 'fan service' is not a solely visual phenomenon but can also be present in the aural landscape of a video game as well. While male characters have battle cries that connotes with power and energy, their female counterparts tend to sound either frustrated and hysterical or erotic

grunts. Droumeva (2018) questions the need to gender artificially created voices that do not have a specified gender, such as AI characters.

The framework of the male gaze has been debated, as despite trying to challenge patriarchal notions of gender and spectatorship, such a framework can reinforce the male/active and female/passive binary. Further, frameworks on gaze in game studies should reflect the agency of the player as they are not simply viewers but actively participating in the narrative (Jennings, 2018). For example, Lara Croft was the first female protagonist at a time when female characters functioned as either victims or decoration in games (Shaw, 2014).

In online games with customizable avatars, the avatar is not solely a representation of the player, but the avatar influences and is influenced by relationships and communities online (T. L. Taylor, 2009). Here, avatars "serves as the artefact through which users not only know others and the world around them, but themselves" (T L Taylor, 2009, p.96). In many MMOGs (massive multiplayer online games) and MMORPGs (massive multiplayer online roleplaying games), characters and thereby avatars, are restricted by options regarding race and class. This language dates back to pen-and-paper RPGs (role-playing games), where in-game race refers to an (often fictitious) species and in-game class refers to a skillset or vocation. Similarly, to the case of Lara Croft, TL Taylor (2009, p.13) noted that in EverQuest, female avatars, especially those with humanlike features, tend to wear little clothing and show off their "significant cleavage". On a similar note, Corneliussen (2008) noted that despite being fictitious, the races in World of Warcraft (WoW) are gendered according to the male-female binary, as female characters have breasts and slimmer waistlines whereas male characters have more notable muscles. As the fictitious races of WoW are shaped by cultural borrowing, they manage to be both racist as well as antiracist at the same time (Langer, 2008). While there is diversity in terms of what kind of avatars female identifying players prefer, there appears to be a consensus on the importance of choice. Being able to decide how one is represented online provides the player with agency and can function as a tool for self-representation (Shulman, 2017).

In their work on the psychological elements to avatar creation, Loewen, Burris & Nacke (2021) differentiates between realistic, ideal and distinctly different avatar creation in relation to their offline identities. They noted that while some participants created avatars that corresponded with their offline identities, others preferred to using an avatar to create an identity that is distinctly different from their offline identities. Further, Loewen et al (2021, p. 5) noted that a preference to create distinctly different avatars can stem from "casting off of perceived demands within the relative safety" of a virtual game. Similarly, Stenros and Sihvonen (2020) noted that through offline role-playing games, the player can explore their character through role-playing. While these players can find the lack of audience and

thereby social norms liberating, their play is still limited by the game itself. That some choose to explore certain identities in offline games suggests that online platforms such as the ones discussed here are shaped by their communities and respective norms, which is the topic of the following chapter.

3. COMMUNITY

3. Community

Here, the online communities the participants are part of and engage with are discussed through the community of practice framework (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2018; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2014). Communities of practice include three elements: a domain of knowledge, a community of people and a shared practice. These communities are parallel as individuals can be, and often are, part of several communities at the same time. Further, the communities are changing as some individuals join the community whereas as others move on. Newcomers become legitimate peripheral participants by engaging in the practice the way members do. As newcomers gradually take on more complicated activities, they become more central to the community of practice and thereby more and more legitimate members. Wenger (2018) notes that while this framework is relatively new, the experience of it is not. Rather, the framework functions as a tool to systematically explore and thereby better understand a familiar concept.

Participation in a community of practice "shapes not only what we do, but also who we are and how we interpret what we do" (Wenger, 2018, p. 220). Similarly, Jenkins, Ito and boyd (2016) argue that participatory culture in a networked is shaped by both activity as well as cultural belonging and identity. Accordingly, constructing identities is part of activity within these communities. Communities of practice happen everywhere, including online spaces such as video games (see e.g. Barr, 2019; Shaffer, 2006; Steinkuehler & Oh, 2012) or social media platforms (see e.g. Malik & Haidar, 2020). Jenkins et al (2016, p. 12, cursive original) emphasize that a shared social practice online is not simply logging on to a platform, but some form of activity is required: "We participate *in* something; we interact *with* something". Barr (2019, p.18) argue that, particularly interesting in relation to video games, is the "idea that the community of practice need not have formed with the intention of learning about a particular domain: any learning that does take place be entirely incidental". Further, Drotner (2008, p.176) notes that through this framework, video games are positioned as potential alternatives to more traditional forms of learning, especially as they are perceived to be in tune with "future demands of collaboration, strategic thinking, and hit-and-run decision making". However, she argued that playing video games is perceived as a highly gendered activity, and therefore questions of equality should be considered in these discussions.

In this chapter, I outline what shapes the platforms as communities of practice, and then shift focus to questions of equality and diversity within the platforms in chapter 4.

3.1 Social media as communities

Instagram is currently one of the most important social networking sites on a global scale and has added new and iterated its features over the years, such as videos in 2013 and stories in 2016. Caliandro and Graham (2020) noted that while Instagram as a platform is featured in many research endeavours, they tend to focus on a specific niche of the platform. One such niche is for example children's right to online privacy in terms of content regarding parents sharing metadata through ultrasound photographs (Leaver & Highfield, 2018), images of breastfeeding (Locatelli, 2017) and within sharenting; parents sharing their children and/or parenting online (Holiday, Norman & Densely, 2020). Accordingly, due to billions of users, the myriad of perspectives (of which some are reported through research) and numerous communities, it is a challenge to discuss Instagram in general. Caliandro and Graham (2020, p.2) therefore suggest future research endeavours to "exploit the specific methodological potentials of Instagram's hashtags, mentions, likes, captions, and geotags to enable in-depth investigations". Here, I do not claim to provide such a cohesive insight into Instagram, but rather to pinpoint the aspects of Instagram that are relevant for the communities explored in the data.

In online communities, users are known by others through their username, pseudonyms that the users have chosen for themselves (Sveningsson, 2012). Zhou et al (2021) noted that usernames are not only shaped by self-expression but are also part of a collective self-esteem and group identification within the community. While there are various motivators when creating usernames, Zhou et al (2021) claim that this choice is simultaneously affected by the online community and the values and norms associated with it. On Instagram, some variations on usernames are common, in general however, Instagram follow the principle of the real-name web, where users are encouraged to use their offline names in online contexts (Leaver & Highfield, 2018). Online communities with a 'real-name' emphasis are organized around a principle of trust. This trust entails that when a name is presented, that is the name (or at least similar to the name) that the person identifies with offline as well and that the profile is an extension of that offline identity (Arfini, et al, 2021). Unlike the pseudonymity on Tumblr where limited connection between the users online and offline identities is the norm (McCracken et al, 2020), on 'real-name' platforms, a profile with limited offline connection is considered a 'fake' one.

Both Instagram and Tumblr offer the option of 'liking' a post; a feature where the social logics as well as the heart iconography is well established over multiple social media platforms (Proferes & Morrissey, 2020). Through focus group interviews with teenagers in Southern California, Yau and Reich (2018) noted that likes can be considered a measure of how

popular one is. Similarly, Sirola et al (2021) noted that their participants online behaviour tended to formed by positive online group norms, resulting in the participants primarily liking an image that had already gained a fair amount of positive attention. However, for the teenagers in Yau and Reich's study (2018), comments had more weight than likes because the activity takes more time and effort and was therefore considered more meaningful. Further, the teenagers use social media like Instagram and Facebook to present themselves in a positive light towards their peers. Although the teens primarily used these platforms to engage with those they knew offline (family, friends, acquaintances), there were individual variations (Yau & Reich, 2018). If unintended users, like parents or teachers, gain access to a teenager's profile, and thereby see content not intended for them to see, it can result in what boyd (2014, p.31) refers to as "a collapsed context". According to the teens in Yau & Reich's study (2018), self-presentation focused on being perceived as interesting, likeable and attractive. In order to achieve this one should balance content between not showing negative emotions (as that was considered private) to not solely sharing positive content and achievements (because that could be considered bragging). The girls in the study appeared to be more likely than their male peers to ask their friends for help by liking a post or by their input on content. On the other hand, the girls also expected that their close friends would like their posts no matter the content, whereas the boys did not hold the same expectation.

Mass media has been established as a powerful contributor for women's body dissatisfaction, including 'newer' media such as social media (Fardouly, Diedrichs, Vartanian, & Halliwell, 2015) and especially so for photo centred social media (Meier & Gray, 2014). However, what is considered the norm can vary depending on context as well as the type of content that is featured in one's feed (Jenkins et al, 2016). In an experimental study with 160 female undergraduate students, Slater, Varanasi & Diedrichs (2017) examined the impact of 'fitspiration' (fitness inspiration) and self-compassion images on women's body image. They found that the women who viewed fitspiration images on Instagram tended to show less self-compassion than the control group. They therefore argue that fitspiration did not appear to be benign as they often contain guilt-including messages and imply the need for self-control and discomfort in order to achieve certain goals. Further, the women exposed to self-compassion images reported greater body satisfaction and appreciation. In a similar vein, by analysing Instagram images, Webb et al (2019) noted that the "fit ideal" of contemporary fitspiration is narrowly constructed and thereby reproducing a normative message of what a healthy body looks like. Further, they found that images tagged to curvy health-promoting communities on Instagram tended notably more diverse in terms of ethnicity than mainstream fitspiration content.

Apart from current gender norms connected to bodily representation which we will get back to later in this section, this might also be connected what Gee refers to as 'the new capitalism' and its connection to identities. Gee (2000, p. 115) argues that the "scientific, technological, and demographic changes have altered the social and economic relations among people". With the global market being highly competitive as well as saturated, there is a demand to create new 'needs': products and services aimed at particular groups of people. For example, Salter and Blodgett (2017) noted that the consumer aspect of geek culture has grown and that this partially is enabled by social media. There, one can easily display "one's love of geek culture" and thereby construct a geek identity (Salter & Blodgett, 2017, p. 4). Further, digital influencers are currently recognized by companies as opinion leaders who meditate information to their online followers (de Brito Silva et al, 2020). Companies recognize these influencers as potential brand ambassadors as this new form of celebrity provides a constant stream of communication. Despite their position as role models, there is limited academic research on social media influencers. By analysing posts on Instagram by digital influencers who act as brand endorsers and the follower engagement with those posts, de Brito Silva et al (2020) noted that followers are more interested in the influencer than the products. Therefore, products need to be embedded in their posts in a way that emphasizes the influencer rather than the product. Posts with higher levels of follower engagement tended to be photographs of the influencer exposing her body, "which reflects a sexual appeal but also reaffirms a lifestyle that should inspire followers to seek bodily transformation through consumption practices" (de Brito Silva et al, 2020, p. 156). However, they also argued that this type of marketing is more than simply normative beauty. Influencers are associated with certain values and behaviours, and the product they endorse should be aligned with the influencers perceived identity in order for the marketing to be successful (de Brito Silva et al, 2020). Additionally, Hutchinson (2021) noted that influences produce content based on fan feedback, but in order to distribute their content, the influencers also utilize the affordances of the algorithms that drive the platforms. Similarly, in their study on Scandinavian news outlets, Haim et al (2021) noted that traditional news media needed to adapt their content to the algorithmically curated social media platforms. Correspondingly, marketing and thereby consumerism have changed due to social media networks such as Instagram, where the role models no longer are solely celebrities but ordinary people. As these influencers are closer to their audiences and the opinions posted are seen as authentic, they affect their followers' purchase decisions in a different manner than traditional celebrities. Therefore, de Brito Silva (2020, p. 158), argue that due to likes and comments being "the thermometers used to gauge relationships built and maintained", social media platforms should not be

disregarded in marketing. Further, in a study on case 1, Paakkari and Rautio (2019) stressed that by the participant scrolling through such images in class, the commercialism embedded in them takes a step into the classroom trough the screen of the mobile phone.

In comparison to Instagram, a highly popular social platform, *Tumblr* is less mainstream and often accused of being a venue for anti-social freaks, teenage girls and social justice warriors (SJWs). The term SJW has been used for progressive movements, such as feminists and antiracist activists, that want to ensure economic justice and recognition for marginalized identity categories. However, the progressive association of these activists has been muddied by the “alt-right mediasphere” and is now associated with “emotional fragility, overreaction, and policing political correctness” (Robards et al, 2020, p.288). Unlike other social media platforms such as Instagram, there is no front page nor a general feed on Tumblr, and thereby no general narrative or any reference to a dominant culture of the platform. Each Tumblr feed is individually curated to offer a collection of content that reflects the “user’s fluid affinities, communities, and identities” (Willard, 2020, p. 243).

The-Cimmerians (2020, p.78) argues that nobody “is more critical of Tumblr than Tumblr users” themselves, and users often refer to Tumblr as “this blue hellscape”. However, the criticism within Tumblr is often in regard to platform functions, such as the ban of NSFW content in 2017 (Tiidenberg, 2020). There appears to be no desire among the users for the platform to have a higher social standing. As I will get back to in 4.1, Tumblr is currently used as a platform for those marginalized by society. If Tumblr were to have a higher social standing, and thereby more a mainstream image, the users would lose their “underground carnival” for self-expression, interests and/or desires that deviate from social norms (The-Cimmerians, 2020, p.78).

The language used on Tumblr is shaped by an inclusive, queer-positive stance yet also sexually explicit and simultaneously shaped by academia. According to The-Cimmerians (2020, p.79), Tumblr humour is highly characterized by satire, sarcasm, self-referential analysis, memes, puns and a balance between the “sacred and the profane”. Tumblr is simultaneously home to a number of (and sometimes overlapping) groups, ranging from fandom and/or alternative erotica enthusiasts as to those engaged in social criticism. These groups intersecting can result in unexpected situations, like the user comment mentioned by The-Cimmerians (2020, p. 79): “While I do truly enjoy social justice discourse on Tumblr, it does tend to lead to statements like ‘yes, Ninehottentaclesinmybutthole is correct, the feminist movement in the US has racist roots and we must never deny it’”.

The interaction within any such group is primarily done through reblogging an original post. The original post can be interpreted in various ways, not only in relation to the individual dashboard it is presented on, but

by the commentary added since it was published. Reblogging entails posting another user's post to one's own profile or blog, and with the option of adding an additional comment. However, these comments are not limited to text; they can be in the form of images, GIFs and so forth (Neill Hoch, 2020; Popova, 2020). Tumblr also offers the users the option of hashtagging (and thereby providing freeform metadata to) their posts (Popova, 2020; Willard, 2020), to organise their content and "make it discoverable" (Proferes & Morrissey, 2020, p. 29). However, due to the high volumes of traffic on certain tags and the inconsistent way tags are used, it is difficult to find all relevant content on a certain topic (Popova, 2020). Further, as the users cannot see the timestamp of a post, Tumblr becomes timeless and at the same time disorienting to new users. Popova (2020) exemplifies temporality on Tumblr through a fandom where one of the main stars fazed rape allegations. News articles were posted as they were published and then reblogged with additional comments, either agreeing with the previous comment or presenting an argument against it. Thereby these posts resulted in numerous parallel branches discussing the same phenomena, however, the discussion died down after two weeks and many left the fandom afterwards due to the rape allegations. Due to its interaction through reblogging and the poor searchability with varying usage of tags, Popova (2020) claims that Tumblr has extremely limited recoverability. For example, if a new person joined the aforementioned fandom after this discussion calmed down, it is possible they might not ever access these discussions. On the other hand, Neill Hoch (2020, p. 70) argues that "Tumblr thrives on incoherency" as the messiness can be liberating from societal norms dictating suitable forms of interaction. Further, Willard (2020) note that while Tumblr can be considered difficult to manoeuvre, the design hinders the uninitiated from successfully navigating the platform. The design can therefore hinder any potential harassment towards the elsewhere marginalized groups active on Tumblr.

Media fandoms and fan practices are a foundational part of Tumblr as it is built upon the engagement with and cultural capital of fandom culture (Salter & Blodgett, 2017). However, the platform is highly shaped by the progressive social justice groups as well as queer and/or feminist communities migrated from *LiveJournal* (LJ) to Tumblr in the early 2010s (McCracken et al, 2020). This migration was not direct nor definite, however as LJ began censoring and policing adult and queer content, Tumblr became the new platform for millennials and media fandoms (Willard, 2020). In terms of media fandoms, Tumblr currently functions as the main site of social interaction. However, fanfics are often linked on Tumblr, either by the author or gathered in a 'fic rec' (a compilation of recommended fanfics often on a specific pairing) from *Archive of Our Own* (A03), a fan-owned, fan-run fanfiction archive that function as the repository of fan-fiction works (Popova, 2020).

Kanai (2019, p.60) notes a norm on Tumblr to create "safe, funny, ´girlfriendly' material" based on their everyday lives in bite-sized moments. By 'girlfriend', Kanai (2019) refers to a youthful femininity and the norms and experiences shaping it. When creating content, the young women on Tumblr need to balance traditional feminine ideals such as beauty and (hetero)sexual attractiveness with an ambition towards educational or work-related achievements. Self-regulation appears to be pervasive through different topics; whether that is in relation to maintaining their lives, careers, bodies and/or (hetero)sexual relations. Through these posts, their private lives become available for public scrutiny and evaluation, visible and quantifiable through in-platform interactions such as ´likes´. In order for posts to be approachable and have circulatory value (be worthy of reblogging), humour is essential. Self-deprecating humour is one way to meet the demands of a self as "articulated in such a way to convert these demands into things that both bloggers and readers, as 'girlfriends', can recognise, laugh about and circulate" (Kanai, 2019, p.65). Moderation is used in order to create reliability, but actual discomfort should be downplayed.

In her analysis of about 800 Tumblr blog posts made by young women, Kanai (2019, p. 74) noted that "These regulatory strictures are deeply and intimately entwined within not only self-management but also in cultures of sociality built around them". For example, in terms of food and body, self-regulation becomes highly pervasive. One hand, the young women are aware how to manage and present what is considered an attractive body. On the other hand, direct references to dieting or anxiety over food consumption are not seen as funny 'girlfriendly' material. Therefore, humorous posts about the struggles to subtly take a stance against the dominating beauty ideal while still acknowledging it appears to be the way to go. There is a similarly small operating area in terms of post of education or studying. On one hand, in this youthful middle-class (white) form of femininity, higher education is the norm and therefore taken for granted. On the other hand, bragging about one's academic achievements is not funny and has little circulation value. Accordingly, humorous confessions of barely making it in combination with a certain level of deficiency towards the educational system appears to be the key area for such posts. Additionally, there appears to be a sweet spot in terms of idleness; acknowledging the desire to relax while simultaneously adhering to the expectations of productivity.

Brandes and Levin (2014) noted that teenage girls tend to feel more obligated to work on themselves and to gain and maintain peer acceptance than the boys their age, both offline and online. The possibilities for identity construction on social network sites can provide young women with empowerment as well as pressure. On one hand, they can use different tools to construct what they perceive as favourable identities and thereby gain

agency and peer acknowledgement. On the hand, keeping up such an identity requires effort and can be a source of stress as such an identity is under constant scrutiny. Rutter (2020) noted a similar duality of social media use albeit in an entirely different context, as the participants at the time were in the criminal justice system. On one hand, public labelling and stigmatisation resulted in limited tools to change how the participants were portrayed in media coverage and in social media discussions. On the other hand, social media provided the participants with agency and access to more varied social capital even under otherwise restricted conditions. Social media platforms, in particular those with a 'real-name' emphasis, offers agency and scrutiny simultaneously and thereby create a balancing act between online and offline communities.

3.2 Video games as communities

All those who play video games on any device can be considered a player, however, not all of them identify themselves as gamers. Gamer indicates a certain amount of time and money spent on games, the genres played and knowledge of game related references (Juul, 2009; Shaw, 2014). For example, demonstrating historical insights, such as referencing older titles in a franchise, showcases that one is a 'time-served' member of the community (Maloney et al, 2019). Similar to geek culture at large (Salter & Blodgett, 2017) gaming used to be a subculture, and presenting oneself as a 'gamer' was a both an identity construction and simultaneously, a signal that one belonged to that community (TL Taylor, 2015). For example, in their study on players in the United States and Poland, Cwil and Howe (2021) noted that the participants that played online were more prone to identify themselves as gamers. TL Taylor further noted that as the gaming subculture becomes more mainstream, the community wrestles with the implications of being infiltrated by the masses and potential loss of uniqueness. Interestingly, while the stereotype of a competitive gamer is young man (Witkowski, 2018), Toth et al (2021), did not notice a connection between age and self-identification with certain game content.

Identifying as a gamer is also connected to preferred game genres. Consalvo and Paul (2019) noted that the distinction between who is and who is not considered a 'real gamer' is connected to what the dominant discourse considers to be 'real games'. For example, games played on computers or game consoles like FPSs and RPGs are considered real games whereas mobile games and/or Facebook games are not considered to be real games. In the study by Cwil & Howe (2021), the participants from the United States that played role playing games were more prone to identity as gamers than those playing mobile or sports games. No such connection was present among the Polish participants, suggesting that what constitutes as a gamer is also contextually situated. Additionally, according

to Consalvo and Paul (2019, p. xxxiv), the distinction for what constitutes as a 'real game' is based on "developer pedigrees, the game itself, and the money trail". In their mixed-methods study on *Reddit's* r/gaming community, Maloney, Roberts and Graham (2019), noted that domain knowledge on 'real games' can be showcased in multiple ways. Among these are technical expertise, pop-cultural knowledge as well as game industry and cultural insights, such as referencing different developing studios. Long-time players can create kinship through nostalgia over retro games; however, such kinship that is based on social and cultural capital and can therefore be seen as exclusionary for newer players. As gaming has traditionally been a male-dominated arena, such knowledge is coded as a male and thereby a mark of status. While showcasing such insights is not an overt assertion of power, it can be highly intimidating for those new to the gaming scene or those playing low status games, as a newer or more 'casual' titles are often subtly dismissed. Correspondingly, as mobile games, with low 'real game' status, are highly popular among female players, female players tend to not be considered 'real gamers'. Consalvo and Paul (2019) argue that such a distinction does not only affect who gets welcomed into the community, but also limit the game industry in terms of collaboration and innovation.

Gaming as a practice is further more than solely the in-game activity, players also engage with the community through offline as well as online discussions, resources referred to as gaming paratexts by Consalvo (2017). One such online paratext is Reddit's r/gaming community, here discussed by Maloney et al (2019). In-game communication can be a complex network of online and offline communities where the player is socialized into the norms and hierarchies of multiplayer games (T.L. Taylor, 2009). In-and-through this socialization process, players have shown to rely on guidance from more experienced players (Rambusch et al, 2007; N. Taylor, 2016; T. L. Taylor, 2015; Rusk, Ståhl & Silseth, 2020; 2021; Wright et al, 2002). Squire (2011) notes that the educational potential of video games is beyond the software as such and emphasizes the participatory communities around the game. Video games can therefore be seen as 'new' public spheres where learning is social and distributed (Gee, 2007) with the potential to develop competencies such as communication and adaptability (Barr, 2018). Harper (2014, p.91) noted that within the communities, the players "engage one another about normative practices, strategies, and other elements of the play experience" (Harper, 2014, p. 91). Further, it is noteworthy that in the r/gaming community, the commentary on gameplay mastery were not overtly self-celebratory. Rather, such comments had a "didactic function, with users explaining to others the complexities and nuances of mastering a given game" (Maloney et al, 2019, p. 63) and overt attempts of users trying to assert their gameplay superiority where often downvoted. Accordingly, while gameplay skills function as social and cultural capital and maintain

the power structures of gaming, the most appropriate way to express such mastery is through educating less practiced players.

Games like CS (2000) have been instrumental in transforming an individual pastime activity into something professional with a focus on teamplay (Rambusch et al, 2007). Further, competitive gaming has resulted in a subculture sliding into being mainstream and raised questions of what 'sport' is (T L Taylor, 2015). Having roots in local tournaments, esports is currently a growing and evolving industry. However, despite being a global phenomenon, there is still a lack of acceptance and knowledge of esports among stakeholders such as academia as well as mainstream sports (Hayday & Collins, 2020). However, according to Reitman, Anderson-Coto, Wu, Lee and Steinkuehler (2020), due to its novelty and shifting nature also entails that those currently researching esports are thereby part of defining and shaping it. Additionally, while playing video games is becoming more mainstream, it is still an activity associated with a certain stigma. Zhao and Zhu (2020, p.13) noted that Chinese professional esport players face stigmas where their careers are seen as a way to "cover up the fact that they are losers" and as missed opportunity for higher education. As they might internalize such stigma, Zhao and Zhu (2020) claim that young players need guidance to support both their physical and mental wellbeing.

Competitive players often mention their 'main game', which is the video game that they put their effort into and often compete with (Harper, 2014). The communities' focus on one particular competitive game can result in exclusionary structures of homogenous groups (Hayday & Collins, 2020). Harper (2014), notices three forms of gameplay within a game community. The first is play practice, which entails how they game is actually played by the participants, how they manage the game and the decisions they make. The second is normative play, which refers to the way the players think the game should be played. Finally, the third is social play, which includes both playing games together, but also encompasses how the players engage in the culture of gameplay together.

Skill and knowledge can be considered the foundations of the competitive gaming community (Anderson-Coto, Tomlinson, Collado & Squire, 2019). Even esports viewers employ their in-game experience and thereby presumed expertise to exclude certain participants in the fan community. In his study on the playing community around fighting games, Harper (2014, p.59) noticed the ideal of fairness and a level playing field. Using what is perceived as low-skill or unfairly powerful characters, often referred to as 'cheap' or 'broken', are then seen as hollow victories. Choices that make the game unbalanced will gain disapproval whereas choosing a difficult character will garner respect. While not necessarily a result of player actions, another factor of importance to the level playing field is lag and dropped frames as it might result in in-game actions being lost or mistimed. Additionally, Anderson-Coto et al (2019) noted that unlike

traditional sports, players of esports need to adapt to the latest patch as the game is continuously updated.

When the ideal of a level playing field is ruptured, the players can become toxic. Toxic in-game behaviour can consist of cyberbullying, griefing, mischief, sexism, sexual harassment, trolling, cheating, and/or flaming. In their highly experimental study on in-game toxic behaviour in relation in to play performance, Monge and O´Brien (2021) noted that toxicity led to poor team performance. However, they suggested that these two are part of a negative spiral, where toxicity leads to poor performance, which in turn leads to lowered performance, which increases the level of toxicity and so forth. Correspondingly, while these communities can foster competencies such as communication and collaboration (Rusk, Ståhl & Silseth, 2020; 2021), the impact of these communities are not always positive as they might be shaped by biases. These include for example racism, misogyny and homophobia, and this phenomenon is further discussed in chapter 4.2.

4. DIVERSITY

4. Diversity

As noted by Lisa Nakamura (2007), early theorizers predicted that the Internet would create racial equality online, yet that is not necessarily the case. She further points out that contemporary online communities as well as offline ones are shaped by a so-called colour blindness, where its preferable to claim that “race doesn´t matter” rather than seeing and acknowledging racial differences. While the participants in Nakamura’s (2007, p.206) study chose to visualize themselves within the constraints of their gender and race online, she notes that they are simultaneously affected by a contemporary society where “it has become profoundly unfashionable to be one thing or another, and actively dangerous to signify race or ethnicity in the public sphere”. Further, Kishonna Gray (2020), notes that academic discussion on online identity is often revolving around gender and less focus has been placed on questions on race and ethnicity. Gray further points out that racism online can wary from stereotyping and hyper sexualization to harassment and death threats. In the following section, the online platforms are discussed in relation to diversity, with a focus on gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity. While the aim of this thesis is not directly feminist nor queer theoretical, insights into these perspectives was useful in order to discuss diversity on online platforms, especially so in terms of what identities are encouraged and which are repressed.

Gender is a complex structure consisting of various logics and therefore, expressions of masculinity and femininity can therefore be fragmented and/or conflicting (Connell, 2005). Although shifting and contextual, hegemonic masculinity is the dominant norm of masculinity within a specific context. Homophobia has shaped the current hegemonic masculinity, where distancing oneself from homosexuality is seen as a sign of “true” masculinity, whereas homosexuality is seen as feminine and less worthy. Homophobia as a term was coined in the early 1970’s the to describe how heterosexual men distanced themselves from and even oppressed homosexual men. Feminist as well as queer theoretical researchers agree that masculinity is connected to power in current Western society. Reluctance towards challenging this norm reinforces a power hierarchy where certain groups are oppressed, such as women and homosexual men (Connell, 2005). Further, within the academic discourse on gender and power hierarchies, hegemonic masculinity is often focused upon as it is considered more problematic than femininity (Benwell, 2017). Weapon, hunting as well as violence has traditionally been associated with masculinity. The ideal of masculine heroism is often portrayed in popular culture, although it has limited relevance in modern warfare other than as a motivator (Connell, 2005). Benwell (2017) noted a form of masculinity where the aim is to gross out the other. Then, resistance against violence or

otherwise unpleasant content is seen as a form of hardened masculinity, especially in comparison to the sensitive feminine psyche. Through the development of information technology, where advanced technological competence is seen as a masculine trait, an additional norm of hegemonic masculinity evolved; technomasculinity (Johnson, 2018).

Gender and sexuality are closely intersected with both each other as well as power hierarchies (Queen, 2017). Sexual identity is however not the same as erotic actions; sexual identity is rather the social framework that categories people according to their sexuality as well as preconceptions of sexuality and corresponding sexual practices (Queen, 2017). A queer theoretical approach entails questioning norms regarding biological sex, gender and sexuality and how certain expression of these are socially (re)produced as desirable and other seen as deviant. By pointing out the structures, intuitions and actions that reproduce heterosexuality as the natural and desirable alternative (Milani, 2017), it is possible to pinpoint a heteronormative stance. Further, the silence culture regarding sexuality and the assumption that sexual activity and attraction is a private matter can reinforce heteronormativity (Queen, 2017).

4.1 Diversity in social media

The teenagers interviewed by Yau and Reich (2018, p. 203) echoed offline gender norms in relation to online platforms. They stated that boys' posts on Instagram or Facebook signalled masculinity when they featured someone "playing sports, flexing muscles, and making 'manly' faces". Further, the boys in the study also associated masculinity with humour. The girls did to a higher degree stress being perceived as attractive as recruitment in a successful post. This echoes studies on adolescents in offline contexts: "girls were more likely to characterize popularity as being attractive and having nice clothes, while boys were more likely to describe popular individuals as being athletic" (Yau & Reich, 2018, p. 204). Ahmed and Madrid-Morales (2021) studied the gender divide in online political engagement in three Sub-Saharan African nations; Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa. They noted that social media has the potential to provide those in non-urban locales in low- to mid-income democracies with both information and political agency. However, as these societies remain shaped by patriarchal values and the gender-divide in these contexts remain deep rooted, primarily men with higher education tended to utilize the potential of online political engagement. Ahmed and Madrid-Morales (2021) thereby argued that in order to increase female political engagement online, policymakers also need to address the social inequalities in offline society.

Yau and Reich (2018) further noted a preference and norm among teenagers of presenting oneself in a flattering light amongst one's peers.

Accordingly, secondary accounts on Instagram were at times created, accessing parallel online communities. On such accounts, the teenagers could post images of oneself that were perceived as ugly or images that did not fit the aesthetic of their primary account without risk to peer approval. Similarly, Manovich (2017) noted that since 2016, there has been a trend for Instagrammers to have two separate accounts: one that is private and one that is public. The private one then often functions as a "testing ground" for the public one. As a platform, Tumblr is described as the "social justice platform", a "contemporary neoliberal landscape" (Kanai, 2019, p.60) a "vibrant centre of queer discourse and collectivity" (Cavalcante, 2019, p. 1715) and an alternative world with a "queer, carnival-like atmosphere that distinctly dispenses with normalcy" (McCracken, Cho, Stein & Hoch, 2020, p. 2). Through its pseudonymity and lack of social hierarchies, Tumblr offers a "counter public" (Renninger, 2015) for those in ideological conflict with and/or marginalized within the public sphere. Among these groups are among others youth, LGBTQIA+, feminists, sex workers, people of colour, people with mental illness and those disabled. As these groups tend to be marginalized in mainstream society and media production, Tumblr offers an alternative for those searching a counterculture for resource-sharing, education and critical thinking as well as alternative erotica and porn. By choosing what kind of content is and is not visible on one's feed, it is possible to create a safe space to explore with likeminded people without the norms of the surrounding society (McCracken et al, 2020; Robards et al, 2020).

While Tumblr is not the first 'cyberqueer' platform (Wakeford, 2000), it is currently highly popular among LGBTQIA+ youth. Based on a survey with LGBTQIA+ youth in Australia, Robards et al (2020) noted that queer youth was five times as likely to use Tumblr than comparative studies with the general public. Further, Robards et al (2020) noted two primary themes for engaging with Tumblr: connection and community as well as learning and exploration. In terms of community, 65 percent of the participants chose "to communicate with people who are like me" as their primary motivation for being on Tumblr. While the surrounding society is often heteronormative and sometimes even hostile, Cavalcante (2019, p.1716) notes the importance of Tumblr as it welcomes "nonnormative forms (identities, spaces, practices, expressions, etc.) of gender and sexuality". Further, Tumblr allows all users, including queer youth, to narrate their own online identities for likeminded audiences (Cavalcante, 2019). These forms of self-expression are not confined to a diary, but are shared and mediated in networks of comfort and community (Robards et al, 2020). Additionally, Tumblr offers the users to discover more information and learn new words and language for self-expression, especially in relation to gender and/or sexuality.

Calhoun (2020) engaged with Black Tumblr for several years as an ethnographer and observer participant. Black Tumblr, a self-identified network of black users on Tumblr, does not have any form of registered memberships or defined leaders. Instead, the participants engage with each other through hashtags such as #blacktumblr and #melanin and by discussing topics such as institutional racism, cultural appropriation, media representation and beauty ideals. Within this network, Calhoun (2020) noted four somewhat overlapping strategies for everyday online activism. The first was directly challenging hegemonic negative ideologies about black people. One example mentioned is highlighting the hypocrisy regarding naming habits where unconventional names for black children are looked down upon and need to have deeper meaning to be accepted, whereas unconventional names for white children are seen as unique. The second was to promote dialogue about issues that are currently under-discussed, such as criminal behaviour by black men tends to be disproportionately reported by media and black celebrities being more highly associated with criminal activities than white celebrities with similar convictions. The third was, somewhat overlapping with the first, bringing attention to insensitivity comments and their implications for the black community. Calhoun (2020) exemplifies with a discourse where a black person's experience is disregarded by the white person not listening and then replying with a flippant comment like "I have never owned any slaves". These strategies both question colourism as a problematic behaviour at the same time as it offers a space for those who have experienced it to find solidarity with each other.

The fourth strategy was to promote positive representation on black people by celebrating black peoples' actions and accomplishments as well black representation in the media (Calhoun, 2020). As Canella (2020) noted, this strategy was also used on Facebook to proclaim that #BlackIsBeautiful to showcase the complexity of blackness, to celebrate it and to emphasize black voice and agency. A similar strategy was seen by the Latinx Tumblr users reclaiming the hashtag Latina (Rauber Rodriguez, 2020). What originally was a relatively neutral descriptor of identity had become a term associated with a sexualized white colonial view of Latinx women. Latinx teenagers looking for cultural models and forms for self-expression found pornographic images created for a white gaze. However, instead of censoring the tag, there was an effort to reclaim the tag by Latinx users posting selfies. This can be seen an act of digital decolonization where the "Latinas themselves, the native subjects of the hashtag, rejected the racist and misogynist overtones of the tag's colonizers by amplifying their own voices and attempting to reclaim the space for themselves" (Rauber Rodriguez, 2020, p.251).

However, Tumblr also faces a number of issues. While it is acknowledged as a progressive critical platform, this drive to discuss social injustices can

also result in a negative style of policing referred to as a ‘call out culture’ (Robards et al, 2020). Additionally, while Tumblr can have a therapeutic function for those with mental health issues (Hendry, 2020), being exposed to other people's issues might affect the ability to manage one's own health (Robards et al, 2020). The “blue hellscape” has also been marked by safety issues and updates that did not resonate well with the users (McCracken et al, 2020), such as the ban of NSFW content since 2017 (Tiidenberg, 2020). Additionally, Calhoun (2020, p.51) noted, “Tumblr has a U.S.-centric bias, with 42 percent of site traffic coming from the United States”, which reflects the perspectives visible on Tumblr. Further, safe spaces for one group does not automatically create safety for all. For example, while Black Tumblr is clearly sensitive to questions of ethnicity, Calhoun (2020) noted that the network still faced issues with misogyny as well as homo- and transphobia. Similarly, Shay (2020) noted criticism towards feminist movements for not being inclusive for women of colour, thereby resulting in #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen. Further, such spaces can also stagnate the discussion and limit the information presented when only one perspective is heard. Jenkins et al (2016, p. 27) compare such safe spaces to bubbles or gated communities where only the content “of people like them” is allowed. Further, safe spaces can thereby create echo chambers of ideological homogeneity (Cavalcante, 2019) for groups focusing on for example Neo-nazism. Despite the issues, Tumblr continues to offer a platform for marginalized groups to construct identities, share their stories and educate themselves and others.

4.2 Diversity in video games

> Only skill matters, but Asian players are just naturally better, and women are simply not cut out to be part of the competitive [gaming] world. (Harper, 2014, p. 130)

While in theory, video games should be available for almost everyone, the gaming culture is highly dominated by certain ideals, as can be seen in the intentionally provocative quote by Harper (2014) above. While changes have been made in terms, such as more diverse options in character creation and the option for same sex-relationships in-game, contemporary games are still lacking in terms of representation. According to Shaw (2014, p. 42), people “who do not fit the norm (i.e., the popular and marketing construction) of the U.S. heterosexual, white, cis-gendered male, adolescent gamer stereotype” do in fact play video games and, in turn, this calls for diversity within them. Further, Harper (2014, p.109) argue that video games in general have a history of handling racial representation in their content very poorly. Drawing on Butler (2004), Shaw notes that representation serves as a point of recognition to validate identity categories, both for those who identify with such a representation and for

those who do not. Representation therefore functions "as evidence of what could be and who could be possible" (Shaw, 2014, p.41), as the lack of representation "in media texts do present a world in which only certain bodies get to do certain things" (p.92). Further, Shaw (2014, p. 35) notes diversity in video games is seldom among set characters, but representation is rather available as an optional route as "most representation of marginalized groups and identifiers is placed in the hands of players". By shifting this responsibility to the players, then the core of the game and its narrative continues to support traditional values and diversity is reduced to aesthetic pluralism.

As many games are set in fictitious worlds, these offer an environment that can distance itself from potential biases from offline life. Accordingly, in her analysis on the *Fable* game series, Shaw (2014) questioned why transphobia is included in a fantasy game where transition could be celebrated rather than a cause for harassment. Kelly (2015, p. 48) makes a similar point in regard to the fictional world where the *Dragon Age* game series takes place; "Why should the world of Thedas have any sexuality biases baked into the socio-political climate?". Kelly does however continue with noting that video games are man-made artefacts and 'real-life' contexts and values are difficult to leave behind. The latest instalment of the series, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare, 2014), has been praised for its progressive approach with Dorian Pavus; an openly gay male character that has a significant role within the game and a character that is only romanceable for a male protagonist. However, despite his popularity, there are also those who considered Dorian to be a stereotypical depiction of homosexual men (Pelurson, 2018). Further, the game is also noted as one of few non-Japanese games to include a transgender character, Cremisius Aclassi, a trans-man more known as Krem. Although transgender characters appear to be more commonly featured in Japanese games, they tend to be of non-Japanese heritage and even non-human, positioning transgender as "despite possible in-game familiarity - culturally and experientially other" (Lauteria, 2018, p.48).

Tomlinson (2021) notes that player emotional investment in romantic narratives within video games is a currently an understudied aspect of game culture. Additionally, Tomlinson points out that despite video games being coded as a masculine activity, emotional content, especially romantic expression and interest, is often linked to femininity. The previous instalment in the Dragon Age series, *Dragon Age 2* (BioWare, 2011), received mixed reactions due to all four romance options being available for both male and female protagonists. On one hand, they can thereby all be seen as bisexual (Kelly, 2015), however they can also be perceived as 'playersexual' (Tomlinson, 2021) as their sexuality is not part of their character, but solely exists in relation to the player. One of these romanceable characters, Anders, is quite persistent in his advances towards

the player, which has resulted in heated player discussions as turning him down has negative consequences within the game. Some players found his advances uncomfortable or even threatening, and others pointed out that Anders as a character reflects poorly on the gay community (Kelly, 2015). Interestingly enough, the discussion tends to focus on Anders coming on to a male protagonist, not a female one although a female protagonist is an option. Kelly (2015, p.50) notes a stance among the players that if BioWare is going to include non-heterosexual characters and/or relationships, then they have a responsibility to “get it right”. However, game developers point out the issue with seeing Anders as “a conduit of the homosexual community” (Kelly, 2015, p. 50) and that their responsibility is not to create solely noble homosexual characters, but complex characters in general. It is possible to assume that if video games characters were more diverse, then the entire burden of representation would not fall on either the player (Shaw, 2014) nor one or two characters (Kelly, 2015).

One potential reason for limited representation among characters in video games can be the established underrepresentation of women within the male dominated game industry. Based on an international survey conducted in partnership with IGDA (International Game Developers Association), Weststar and Legault (2018) noted that female identifying game developers face negative differential treatment within game-related educational programs. Further, they tend to occupy lower positions in the occupational hierarchy and work with less prestigious projects. In a historical analysis of the US game industry, Nooney (2020) noted that female efforts have often been uncredited as they worked with administration or sales and not directly with the product per say. Okabe (2018) noted that gender norms also affected Japanese women game developers, especially in terms of protectionism and motherhood. Protectionism was exemplified by women being sent home earlier in order to avoid commuting alone at night. While there are certainly risks associated with commuting as a lone woman at night, Okabe noted this also affected how they were perceived as employees and less hardworking than their male counterparts. Further, the participants stated that having a family in general and motherhood in particular does not go well with Japan’s work culture in combination with the crunch time concept within the game industry. The current shift in the game industry, where games are no longer seen as product but as a service that are to be maintained and updated, has a clear effect on those working in the industry and their professional identities. However, whether or not this impacts the inclusion of marginalized group within the game industry remains to be seen (Dubois & Weststar, 2021).

Like the researchers who did and did not become included in the gaming culture due to identity categories such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity and age (TL Taylor, 2015; N Taylor, 2018), the same notion of ‘othering’ shapes

the gaming community in general. Gray (2020) refer to those within certain identity categories are part of an 'in-group' and others are part of an 'out-group'. Further, it is those that fit certain ideal who has the power to define which group one belongs to. In his study on the community around fighting game culture, Harper (2014) noted how certain groups face negative treatment. There appears to be a persistent perception of players with Asian background as inherently skilled at fighting games. Harper reasons that part of this competence might be that the arcade culture is still prominent in countries like Japan which would result in bigger player pools and therefore more skilled competition. However, this perception can also be seen as orientalism, where people from the mysterious Orient are "exotic and unreachable at the same time" (Harper, 2014, p.114). This form of othering has also been noted in the athletic world in the US (Eastman & Billings, 2001) where black athletes are described by their natural athletic disposition, whereas white athletes are more often described by their mental attributes. Further, Harper noted that the perception of Asian players being inherently good at fighting games imply that their skill is a result of them coming from this mysterious land in the east and not of that individuals' efforts.

Similarly, Nakamura (2009) noted a prevalent stereotype of Asian players as 'farmers', a form of unwanted guest workers, within WoW. This stereotypes stem from the phenomenon of so called 'gold farming', selling in-game assets such as weapons or even characters for 'real-money' and where the buyer gets the content without any labour. Those who labour to provide such content are at times from China and South Korea, however, purchasing such assets are seen cheating. Asian players are perceived to precure such assets with less effort, perhaps due to the Orientalism mentioned by Harper (2014); where Asian players in fighting games are considered naturally superior players. Further, this dehumanization of Asian players can stem from earlier where Asian laborers were seen as interchangeable and thereby replaceable (Nakamura, 2009). Additionally, Lily Zhu (2018, p. 229) noted a positioning of West versus East in esports, where North American and European players set aside their differences "for the sake of a common goal: defeating the undefeatable giants of East Asia". Similarly, black women tend to be othered in online gaming communities and that their protests towards such a behaviour often is ignored (Gray, 2020). Further, their presence in online gaming is seen as them 'invading' a white male platform. However, Hussain, Yu, Cunningham and Bennett (2021) note that the majority of scholarship on esports focuses on Western societies and/or on East Asia. Accordingly, the participants of their study consisted of Muslim women gamers from Pakistan that the researchers observed in-game as well as conducted in-depth interviews with. Their results showed that games functioned as tool for the participants to express themselves in a context different from the

patriarchal society of their offline lives. While the participants reported to find this liberating, empowering and a way to construct their 'true selves', they simultaneously reproduced hegemonic masculinity and white dominance in their gameplay. Contradicting the Western understanding of Muslim Women as silent, dormant and/or weak, competitive games provided these Pakistani Muslim women with an oppositional agency in a patriarchal society.

In their analysis of gender constructions in Reddit's r/gaming community, Maloney et al (2019, p.3) described gaming platforms as masculinised spaces where "boys and men remain the predominant social actors in shaping discourse – both in virtual gaming spaces and on related social media" (Maloney et al, 2019, p. 3). In the Finnish player barometer, Kinnunen et al (2018) noted that while playing games is as common among Finnish men as women, more men were defined as active players. While biological sex has little relevance in terms of game play (Ratan et al, 2015), gender representations in the esports scene remains dualistic; female/male, woman/man and femininity/masculinity (Witkowski, 2018). Kowert, Festl & Quandt (2014) noted that there is a prominent negative stereotype of online gamers as "unpopular, overweight and socially inept" which has become a widespread caricature used in multiple forms of media. To research the validity of this stereotype, they conducted telephone interviews with German online gamers, offline gamers and non-players, resulting in a sample of over 2500 people. Contrary to the predictions, they did not find any broad differences between online gamers and offline gamers and/or non-players as the online players reported similar levels of exercise and equivalent levels of quality friendships and sociability as the other groups. However, the more engagement online gamers showed for the game, the less engagement they showed for exercise and/or social relations.

Competitive gaming culture is centred around an assumption of fairness, as it revolves around a notion of skill being the only thing that matters (Harper, 2014). However, as competitive gaming combines two male-coded practices, sports and videogames, this results in limited female access and gender inequality (Hayday & Collison, 2020). Female access to competitive gaming tends to be more generous in contexts with lower stakes, however, less so when the stakes are higher (Sveningsson, 2012). Even the relatively few women that are playing online games professionally are affected by lower price pools than their male counterparts and face a glamorization of them as players and/or their teams due to their gender (T L Taylor, 2008). Or as Harper (2014, p. 116) put it, a culture "where the best and brightest of women players are treated with disdain, hatred and abuse". The notion of skill level being the sole factor of success in competitive gaming places female players in a double bind. One hand, the rhetoric assumes that if female players were as good as male, there would be more women

competing. This stance does not however consider the cultural and structural barriers that keep certain players, such as women, away from competitive gaming. "Women don't belong because they're unskilled, which is proven by their not competing, and so on, and so on" (Harper, 2014, p.118).

There appears to be a prevailing ideal of a competent esport player as a young white cis man who is competitive and heterosexual (Witkowski, 2018). In his work on how masculinity affects research on digital play, N Taylor (2018) refers to this as a 'gamerbro'; he is seen as both agential and masterful. To the gamerbro, "games are the favoured tarrin in which he flexes the techno-muscular power and keen rationality which marks his synthesis of both jock and geek" (N Taylor, 2018, p. 25). The ideal of online players being male is highly pervasive; even in LGBTQIA+ inclusive groups, the player is assumed to be a (gay) man (Sundén, 2012). Based on a mixed methods study on players of *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009) in the US, Ratan, Taylor, Hogan, Kennedy and Williams (2015) noted there was no or little difference in skill level among male and female players with equal amounts of in-game experience. This clearly questions the validity of the current stereotype of a gamer as an adolescent male that acquires in-game skills more easily than his female counterparts. However, Ratan et al (2015) noted that while female players do not have a direct disadvantage in regard to developing in-game skills, they did to some level display less in-game confidence, perhaps as a result of the 'women cannot play games' stereotype. Accordingly, this "supports the claim that gender disparity in gaming may result more from cultural perceptions of gender and gaming, rather than from actual differences in ability or performance" (Ratan et al, 2015, p. 455). Further, Ratan et al (2015, p. 465) noted that female players that have been introduced to the game by their romantic partners found themselves expected to play a supportive role, primarily supporting their partner and thereby to "stand by their man". Harper (2014, p.115) noted a similar "teach your girlfriend how to play" notion among players of fighting games. While some were happy to teach their girlfriends how to play the game, they expressed high levels of excitement in regard to the girlfriend' progress, not unlike that of a parent with a child taking their first steps. While such comments from the individual player might not stem from a clear agenda of misogyny, Harper (2014) noted that this sentiment was repeated and questioned if they would express as much excitement if they were teaching a male friend or brother instead. Maloney et al (2019) noted similar tendencies in discussions on r/gaming, such as discussions on titles and strategies on how to engage girlfriends in the gaming culture. While these comments are inclusive on a superficial level, there is an underlying assumption of women being uninitiated and where men possess knowledge and have the authority to function as access points to the gaming experience. There were also self-deprecating jabs at the geek masculinity

that could be understood as inclusive if not for the assumed heterosexual interest in women. Here the focus was rather on including women in the gaming scene as they are potential romantic partners than creating a more inclusive gaming community.

Current gender norms limit the association between technological competence, digital gaming and femininity (Harvey, 2015), and where family socialization tend to guide boys rather than girls toward computers, science and technology (Gee & Hayes, 2010). The contemporary discourse frames both gaming and technology as a masculine competence; or technomasculinity. This militarized masculinity ideal is not only confined to FPSs, but span genres. The game industry is currently shaped by hardcore players (Juul, 2009) reproducing the games they were playing growing up, and in combination with a profit-based structure, this makes gender-inclusive games a risky venture (Johnson, 2018). Through in-depth interviews with game workers, Johnson (2018) noted that technomasculinity is currently the hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005) within the gaming world, especially so in the game industry. The participants all worked at a mid-sized game development studio in the United States which had produced both critically and commercially successful 'AAA' titles (also known as Triple-A titles, which entails "big budget blockbusters" Dubios & Weststar, 2021, p. 8). Working in the game industry currently entails engaging with a technomasculine ideal where "tough, dominant men of action and physical acumen" are valued (Johnson, 2018, p. 260). Further, those who construct identities in line with the masculine ideal have better prospects of getting employed and fitting in by playing the right games and getting the relevant jokes and references. Similarly, Kivijärvi & Sintonen (2021) noticed that women in the male dominated Finnish game industry emphasize their masculine traits to fit in. Correspondingly, those who do not fit this ideal will be negatively affected and struggle in the industry. This gendered culture is clearly homogenous and "provides a significant inheritance of cultural capital to men" (Johnson, 2018, p. 260). Accordingly, together with a major game company, Chee, Hjorth and Davies (2021), co-designed a number of workshops on diversity and inclusion for the employees to enact change at their workplace.

In some games, such as FPSs, the lack of characterisation might lead to less identification with a character and rather with a role (Fine, 1983). In CS (2000), skill development was connected to player identity and prominent players considered their play as more serious (Rambusch et al, 2007). Voorhees and Orlando (2018) analysed how militarized masculinities were performed in a professional team and their roles. The roles were; the *entry fragger*: the first player into the fight trying to secure a kill, the *AWP:er*: the player wielding the sniper rifle for longer distance kills, the *lurker*: the player that collects information about the opponent's movements, the *support*: the player supporting the other players (usually

the entry fragger) and finally the *strat caller*: the team leader. Performing militarized masculinity tend to correspond with the in-game role. For example, the AWP:er has "constructed the persona of a cold, hard killer, a guy who is too tough for words," (Voorhees & Orlando, 2018, p.218) indicating that not only gender but in-game role are connected to players' identities.

Stereotypes or biases from offline life also affect online game culture as derogatory words for sexual minorities are used as slander and thereby reinforce a negative view of LGBTQIA+ persons online. While this language use is supporting heteronormativity, it is used frequently enough to be considered a 'gamer lingo' (Pulos, 2013; Kiuorti, 2018), and the practice can even be considered 'a game within the game' (Vossen, 2018). For example, Harper (2014) noted both clearly transphobic comments as well as body-policing in online discussions regarding trans women being allowed to play in all female tournaments. Apart from that instance, Harper noted few comments on LGBTQIA+ players, not necessarily due to these players being accepted as part of competitive gaming, but rather due to very few openly queer-identifying players. Furthermore, Voorhees and Orlando (2018) noted that same-sex relationships between the, allegedly, heterosexual team members were hinted at to create excitement among the fans. Accordingly, in the competitive gaming scene formed by militarized (techno)masculinity, homosexuality can be regarded a marketing ploy rather than a person's sexual orientation and part of their identity.

It is however noteworthy that while technomasculinity is the hegemonic gender structure with games and geek culture, it is simultaneously rebutted and even stigmatized in mainstream culture where the masculine ideal is more connected to athleticism (TL Taylor, 2015). Young men with 'geek sensibilities might perceive themselves as marginalized and stigmatized in non-game contexts, such as educational settings (Maloney et al, 2019). Salter and Blodgett (2017, p.4) describe this as geeks previously being defined by their "powerlessness within traditional spaces, and thus have to carve out and build their own institutions and definitions of masculinity in which to excel". However, by geekdom becoming more mainstream, those once othered and victimized are now in a position of power to make victims out of others. Salter and Blodgett (2017, p.11) describe a divide in geek culture at large, where the some wish to "defend the terrain from those less dedicated, who have never suffered from their geekdom". Similarly, TL Taylor (2015) note that there are conflicting voices as the gaming community is wrestling with the implications of gaming become more mainstream. On one hand, there are 'real gamers' that find casual gamers to be infiltrating game culture with 'hypersensitivity' regarding questions like gender, race and sexuality. On the other hand, there are also voices that are happy to see that gaming becomes a legitimate activity in mainstream culture and that the definition of a gamer is challenged and changed.

Further, Maloney et al (2019, p. 93) argue that while marginalization is still very present in the gaming community, so is increasingly inclusive voices, resulting in a "cultural space ultimately marked by contestation". Further, Maloney and colleagues suggest that contemporary masculinity in the gaming community cannot be understood as either progressive or conservative, but rather that these functions as the two end components on a continuum of masculinity. Accordingly, TL Taylor (2015) and Maloney et al (2019) therefore advocates further research on the complexities of masculinity in game culture to better understand both those fitting the technomasculine ideal as well as those that are othered by it.

5. AN ONLINE/OFFLINE ETHNO-CASE STUDY

5. An online/offline ethno-case study

This study is a qualitative case study informed by ethnography, or an ethno-case study (Parker-Jenkins, 2018). Case study as a methodology focuses on an immersed understanding of a phenomenon trough a specific case (Scwandt & Gates, 2018) and is more than simply a 'pilot method' (Flygbjerg, 2006). By researching the activities conducted by an individual or a group, case studies can offer insight into how previous research and empirical data are connected (Cohen et al, 2005). The distinction between ethnography and case study as methodologies can be blurry, since they are somewhat overlapping. Both focus on a participant's perspective of a phenomenon and use varied forms of data collection. However, in ethnography, more emphasis is put on extended periods of time in the field and gaining insight into this phenomenon from multiple contexts, whereas a case study can be more limited in terms of time and researcher immersion into the field (Parker-Jenkins, 2018). An ethno-case study can therefore employ ethnographic methods within the flexibility of a case study framework. The adaptability of case studies can, according to Peimani and Kamalipour (2021), be particularly advantageous in educational research where the focused upon contexts can be highly varied in terms of organisation, focus as well as student age.

Here, the ethno-case study approach is exemplified by two cases. The first case is ethnographic and thereby spanning a longer time period, with multiple sources of data and where research immersion included both online and offline contexts. The second case is, like the thesis as a whole, framed as an ethno-case study and thereby employed ethnographic methods on a specific case yet is shorter in timespan than the first and where the data collection primarily focused on the online context. Accordingly, as this study is positioned on the borderline between these methodologies, I continue to situate mine and my co-authors work alongside both ethnographies and case studies on the topic.

There are variations in the implementation of ethnographic methods yet there are some traits that all forms of successful studies entail: a focus on the insider's perspective on a specific event or setting and an awareness for the complex social context surrounding the event or setting (Pole & Morrison, 2003). In both case study and ethnography, there is often a combination of multiple forms of data collection. However, ethnography prioritises a first-hand experience of the context collected over a fairly lengthy time in a relevant setting, and frequently combined with interviews (Hammersley, 2006). Interviews can support the researcher by giving a participant's perspective and by pointing out norms as well as power hierarchies otherwise hidden to the researcher (Boellstorff et al, 2012). However, defining ethnography based solely on the extended time period

spent doing fieldwork can be misleading since the quality is "at least as important as quantity or duration of the process" (White, Drew & Hay, 2009, p.22). Further, Hammersley (2018) notes that the long-time fieldwork traditionally emphasized within ethnography clashes with the current institutional pressure for researchers to publish. In line with the time restraints and new technologies providing additional and even more effective forms of data collection, Parker-Jenkins (2018) suggests an approach, ethno-case study, that employs ethnographic methods in a specific context or case. Additionally, she claims that this approach can be more limited in terms of time as long as the researcher acknowledges that the study focuses on a section of a much wider and richer context.

While researcher immersion into the context remains crucial, yet the time needed for fieldwork is connected to the research topic and whether or not there is a need for the researcher to capture a full cycle to grasp the context (Parker-Jenkins, 2018). However, access to the field might however be limited in certain contexts due to, for example, the researcher's age and gender. This 'otherness' can limit researcher immersion into the phenomenon, as was the case in TL Taylor's (2015) work on esports and therefore that study was, unlike her previous work, not reported as an ethnography. On the same vein, N Taylor (2018, p.16) noted that he, as a white man, was assumed to be a competent player and thereby gained access to the "homosocial spaces of male-on-male gaming" of esports. To gain researcher immersion without being a student myself (for further discussion, see in section 7.4), the respective research designs in both cases were highly centred around youth engagement. The students (all in their late teens as the time of the respective data collection phases), were members of their respective communities and as such actively shared information with the researcher(s). The term 'participant' is relevant here as it "suggests active sharing of knowledge between members of a culture" and the researchers engaging within it (Boellstorff et al, 2012, p. 17). Accordingly, the students that took part in two cases are referred to as participants as they allowed me and my colleagues insights into communities we would otherwise not have access to. The cases show insight into two different Swedish speaking educational communities in Finland; where case 1 is situated within the more theoretical upper secondary education whereas the case 2 in the more practically oriented vocational school. While the cases display slightly different connections between the online communities and their respective educational program, both case studies are centered around participant-facilitated fieldwork online.

Here, a participant's perspective of the online activities was gained through screen recordings. Screen recordings as data collection is a fairly new method within educational research and the methodological discussion is correspondingly limited (Sahlström et al, 2018, and Paakkari,

2020, are among the few exceptions). Doing field notes while spectating a high paced game like CS:GO would be difficult if not impossible, whereas making field notes after a match might result in the researcher forgetting to make note of certain situations (Boellstorff et al, 2012). Unlike field notes, recordings offer the researcher the possibility to revisit the situation as it occurred in situ multiple times (Blikstad-Balas, 2017; Russell & Barley, 2020). However, repeated viewing of a material might dull the researcher's analytical tools as the singularity of the event is lost in the repeated viewing of recording (Paakkari, 2020). Additionally, there is the risk of magnification where a certain sequence can be understood to represent the whole material and its significance magnified (Blikstad-Balas, 2017). On the other hand, a researcher re-watching a sequence once they have gained further insight into the context and/or field of research might added new levels to the analysis.

This chapter is organized in three sections. In the first section (see 5.1), I discuss virtual as well as visual aspects in relation to the methodology in general and how they are employed in this thesis in particular. Then, two cases are presented (5.2 and respectively 5.3). In the final section (5.4), the ethical perspectives that informed the research design are presented. Do note that study 3 includes a more extensive discussion on research ethics in relation to case 2, primarily in relation to the process of data collection, analysis and dissemination for study 2.

5.1 Virtual and visual

5.1.1 Virtual

As an approach, ethnography focuses on everyday lives as they are lived by different groups of people. There is currently a plethora of ethnographic approaches that focuses on exploring technology as part of our everyday lives; from the detailed method on netnography (Kozinets, 2015), to ethnography in virtual worlds (Boellstorff et al, 2012) as well as digital ethnography (Pink et al, 2016). The core of all approaches is however the same; that the social interaction taking place online (virtually and facilitated by digital technology) is meaningful and worthy as a focus of an ethnographic study. Further, in order to gain insight into these cultures, the ethnographer might need to adapt traditional or explore new methods to employ such research. Participant observation in a relevant context remains one of the core foundations of ethnography, however, observation is somewhat differently organized in a virtual field (Boellstorff et al, 2012). As pointed out by Beaulieu (2007) and Shumar and Madison (2013), doing ethnography online includes new demands on the researcher. The definition of fieldwork becomes blurry when the field is online and the researchers have access to it from their own devices. Fieldwork is no longer

necessarily physically traveling to the context one wishes to explore but a switching of roles. Further, there is a need for new practices of reaching an emic perspective without necessarily having face to face interaction access to and/or with the participants. However, as Boellstorff et al (2012) points out, ethnography has a tradition of being a flexible methodology that is sensitive to new phenomena as well as emerging research questions. Ethnography as a methodology is evolving and contemporary ethnographies show that technology can offer new ways to comprehend online contexts. Here, the fieldwork gave insight into both online and offline contexts and communities.

When doing ethnography in virtual worlds, the researchers aim is to better understand these cultures, how they are similar and different from other forms of culture. According to Boellstorff et al (2012), there are four qualities that define a virtual world: a) it is set in a place that is interactive and traversable, b) is a shared social environment based on synchronous interaction, c) it continues to exist when the participant logs of and can therefore change while a participant is away and d) it allows the participant to embody themselves in the world through some form of visual representation. Do note that Boellstorff et al (2012, p. 7) argues that games like Counter-Strike are in fact *not* virtual worlds as they are not persistent: "the world is only 'on' as long as players are present". While each new game is in a sense 'reset' to zero in games such as CS:GO in terms of in-game resources, some things are however persistent, for example virtual goods purchased such as skins (see study 2). Although a player's ranking is continuously updated to reflect each game played, that ranking remains as the player logs off. Therefore, I argue that while the game mode itself might not qualify to be considered a virtual world, it is part of one of the most frequented virtual worlds of them all: esports. The phenomena of esports takes places in both online as well as offline places and communities that are interactive and traversable and it is a shared social environment with synchronous interaction, both in-game and in the plethora of venues for viewing and discussing esports (T.L. Taylor, 2015). Finally, with the multitude of games to choose from and the millions of enthusiasts (NewZoo, 2018), esports continues to exist when the individual participant has logged off.

In comparison to the different approaches to digital and virtual ethnography previously discussed, there are currently considerably less methodological discussion on case studies on digital or virtual platforms. There are however numerous studies referring to their own work as such or focusing on such platforms. See for example the case studies on student perspectives on asynchronous communication in an online course (Vonderwell, 2003), the production of digital indie games (Bowen Martin & Deuze, 2009), teacher further education online (Holmes, 2013) and the COVID -19 pandemic and the corresponding "emergency online teaching

and learning" in the UK (Peimani and Kamalipour, 2021, p. 13). While their approaches vary, the all refer to their work as case studies.

In this thesis, I borrow concepts from case study (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Scwandt & Gates, 2018), more traditional ethnography (Hammersley, 2018) as well as virtual (Boellstorff et al, 2012) and digital ethnography (Pink et al, 2016). I further refer to the approach presented here as an ethno-case study (Parker-Jenkins, 2018), partially conducted online. The intention behind such a distinction is not necessarily to suggest an additional approach, but to, when relevant to the aim of the study, have the freedom to move between the different methodologies. Here, the identities, activities and communities in focus are the ones online, however, the offline platforms are also discussed when relevant to the activities online. Therefore, I find that an online/offline ethno-case study best describes the methodology employed in this thesis and most clearly communicates this approach to the reader.

5.1.2 Visual

Apart from the perspectives of case study and ethnography as well as offline and online, this thesis is also informed by a visual perspective. Both cases include screen recordings of participants engaging with online platforms that are highly visual. Visual material has the potential to access the participants' voices and contexts in a different way than traditional forms of ethnography can offer (Barley & Russell, 2018). Although visual material in ethnographic research in itself is nothing new, it has traditionally been viewed as a supplementary aid to the written text (Pole & Morrison, 2003). In this thesis, the interaction with the (visual) platform documented in the screen recordings, a visual form of data, function as the primary form of data and the focus is therefore informed by visual ethnography. The screen recordings make the foreground and the interviews are the background of this thesis, where both layers are needed in order to fully comprehend the complexity of the research material.

Seeing is not simply a biological ability, but visuality is affected by cultural practices (Becker, 2004). The three basic forms of doing visual ethnography are through images (mainly photographs), through video and through the web (Pink, 2013). In a sense, all three are present in this study since the interaction with images online is screen recorded, resulting in video data, yet it is the highly visual online platforms that function as the primary data in this study. With a visual approach, the researcher needs to balance the new perspective while still embracing the core essence of the methodology (Barley & Russell, 2018). Emphasis in visual ethnography should be at representing the material in a way that is as true to the participant as possible (Pink, 2013). Barley and Russell (2018) stress the relevance of using the visual material as a starting point for a discussion

with the participants and thereby accessing an emic perspective. Further, the context that the participant lives in, the context where and when the data was collected and the context that the researcher is part of, all affect the data in itself and the understanding of the data. The researcher should be aware of the influences that affect him or herself and aspire to making the participant's voice heard at all times (Pink, 2013).

Photographs are present on several levels in this thesis: as the images as participant interacts with in study 1, but also as a form of data through the video recordings which functioned as contextual information in the analysis. A photograph is not an objective copy of reality, but rather a subjectively captured section of reality. Yet, however subjective the photograph is, the photographer was indeed there to take the picture, and therefore, as Barthes phrases it: “Every photograph is a certificate of presence” (Barthes, 1981, p. 85). John Davies (1992), as referred to by Pink (2013), discusses Barthes (1981) statement about the photographer being present when the photo is taken in regard to ethnography. The ethnographer tends to use photographs in academic texts in order to point out that they were indeed there and has the authority to describe the situation as someone who has first-hand experience. Images can have a different function in research than as a means to insure one's credibility. In visual ethnography, visual material such as photographs function as primary data. Visual materials are not considered *worthier* but rather *as worthy* as other forms of research material (Pink, 2013).

In order to understand student interaction with visual material; longer-lasting images as well as interacting with a visual in-game environment, there was a need for in depth analysis beyond a descriptive level of all the visual elements. In both cases, the online platform was both visual and interactive. In case 1, there was a need to separate the images the participant chose to interact with from all the images that pass by in her feed. Analysing the participants engagement online through interaction with longer-lasting images, in combination with interviews, made it possible to explore what characterised her identity (co)construction. In case 2, the visual analysis is focused on the weapon customization the participants engage with as well as their individual views on the relevance of such visual customization. Their customized in-game experience and how they refer to such choices exemplified part of their player identity (co)construction.

5.2 Case 1: Textmöten

The first case, Textmöten, was an ethnographic research collaboration (see e.g. Sahlström, Tanner & Valasmo, 2019; Paakkari & Rautio, 2019) focusing on exploring how students in upper secondary schools in Finland used mobile phones throughout the school day. The application that allowed the

mobile phones to be recorded was participant controlled, and thereby, the participants had clear agency in terms of the data collection. During a total of 18 days, the data was collected between the spring of 2015 to the autumn of 2016 at two different upper secondary schools with a total of seven students (of age 16-18 at the time). Following an initial visit to the project schools, the participating students were chosen among those expressing an interest to be part of the study. One of the project schools is located near the capital, whereas the in study 1 focused upon school is located in a smaller town in a rural area. In addition to the video recordings as well as the recordings of the mobile phones, there were interviews made with five of the seven participants. During the interviews, the participants were shown excerpts of data to facilitate a discussion on their point of view of the material. These video-stimulated recall interviews (Nguyen et al, 2013; Pitkänen, 2015) enabled a deeper discussion of the mobile phone use in school, and provided the researchers with a substantially richer understanding of the recorded material. In comparison to research designs such as netnography (Kozinets, 2015), where the researchers approach the data from their own device and context, this methodological approach offered an emic understanding of the context the data was collected in, online as well as offline.

As a first impression of the data, it appeared that the participants' relation to the visual material was fleeting and without reflection on the aesthetics of the images. Images used in communication through apps like Snapchat tended to be spontaneous and volatile, and therefore little effort and thought appeared to be put into the aesthetics of the image. Although creating images might appear to be a fleeting activity in the data, it turned out that there was a more long-term approach to images as well: when interacting with lasting images someone else had originally created and posted online. The students engaged with various social media platforms, and insights into of their individual engagement with social media platforms overall has been noted elsewhere (Paakkari, Rautio & Valasmo, 2019). In order to achieve in-depth analysis of what characterizes the identity (co)construction in relation to longer-lasting images, we focused on the participant that expressed the most engagement with visual material. Including all participants engagement with visual material would have shifted focus to lengthy descriptions of the affordances of different social media platforms rather than what characterizes the identity (co)construction done on these platforms. Throughout the data collection phase and the group interviews, it became apparent that the participant called Maria (pseudonym) had the most explicit interest in and long-term engagement with images on social media. Therefore, she was chosen as the participant in study 1.

The original data in case 1 include video recordings from a classroom context as well as breaks where Maria interacted with the images as well as

screen recordings of her doing so. The analysed images are those that the participant interacted with, not all images passing by in her feed(s). While the interactions with the images were noted, the analytical focus in study 1 was on the images themselves rather than on the screen recordings as such. However, the screen recordings as well as the video recordings functioned as contextual information for the researchers' analysis. All images in this material were interacted with within a school context. The data consisted of the images as well as three interviews; two group interviews (spring and autumn of 2015) with three participants and several researchers present (myself, Paakkari & Valasmo), and one individual interview (autumn of 2016) with only one researcher (myself) present. All three interviews were filmed and later transcribed. The quotes used in study 1 have been translated to English. The translated quotes have then been sent to Maria and she has agreed that they match her initial statement.

When analysing communication through images, there were alternative routes to take; such as Roses (2016) analysis of critical sites or multimodal analysis as argued by Kress & van Leeuwen (2006). For several reasons, we decided to use Barthes (1982) concept of messages. In relation to defining visual ethnography, Pink (2013, p.17) stresses a wish to "distinguish a visual ethnography approach more sharply from the semiotic approaches to text that often inform cultural studies analysis". Although Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) focus on visual communication, their perspective is a semiotic one whereas the focus here is on visual culture (Becker, 2004). Furthermore, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) have indeed developed their theories on visual communication based on Barthes (1982) theories on the rhetoric of the image. However, their interpretation of his texts is in some instances rather narrow. They state that Barthes: "argued that the meaning of images (and of other semiotic codes, like dress, food, etc.) is always related to and, in a sense, dependent on, verbal text. By themselves, images are, he thought, too 'polysemous', too open to a variety on possible meanings" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 18). However, I argue that Barthes (1982, p.39) is rather describing the current situation of the society rather than an ideal view of the relation between image and text. For these reasons, we based the analysis on Barthes (1982) theories but acknowledge the value of Kress and van Leeuwens (2006) semiotic perspective by using their vocabulary to clarify our analysis, for example the affordance of colours.

In the data, there were four different platforms of social media where the participant interacts with images: Snapchat, Facebook, Instagram and Tumblr. Since the images on Snapchat are fleeting and only last a short time, they were excluded from study 1. From an ethical point of view, due to privacy settings the images shared on Snapchat and Facebook would not have been accessible to the researchers if it was not for the mirroring of the mobile phones. Further, the intention behind sharing or interacting with an

image in a contained or private environment is different to that of an open environment where anyone can witness the interaction. Since Maria had an open profile on Tumblr as well as Instagram, the images she interacted with there were, at least at the time, open to anyone who knows her username. While not analysed as part of study 1, the images on Snapchat and Facebook functioned as contextual insights into the participants general online activities. The forms of interaction that were recorded in the data was liking an image in both platforms and reblogging an image on Tumblr. However, these forms of interaction do not necessarily have the same social value, see Yau and Reich (2018). Among the analysed images, there are images from Tumblr as well as Instagram during all three time periods although there is in total considerably more material from Tumblr (n=28) than from Instagram (n=13). The material turned out to be somewhat evenly spread over the three periods within grade one (spring 2015, n=13), grade two (autumn 2015, n=16) and grade three (autumn 2016, n=12).

With a research focus informed by Pink (2013), we used Barthes (1982) theories on messages in images as an instrument for analysis. Based on the commercial image, Barthes describes three different levels of communication in an image. The first form of communication is a linguistic message. Linguistic additions in form of short messages added to an image is common in commercial images and also the case for images in social media. The other two levels of communication consist of the image itself and the different types of content within it. Barthes (1982) calls these levels of communication the coded iconic message and the non-coded iconic message. For example, if the image contains an apple, this apple is the iconic substance of both levels. On a non-coded iconic level, the apple remains a fruit whereas on the coded iconic level, it might be interpreted as anything from a brand to a biblical reference. In study 1, the coded iconic message is based on the context in which the images were originally posted, the participant's statements during the interviews and our understanding of the situation in which the image was interacted with by the participant. Further, in study 1, the emphasis is thereby rather on the participants understanding of an image than the original poster's potential intentions. Correspondingly, the content of hyperlinks or tags were not taken into consideration in the analysis unless participant herself clicked on them.

5.3 Case 2: esports in education

The data was collected in collaboration with a vocational school in Finland that the participants (17-18 years old) attended. The participants studied esports as a minor subject but did not play videogames together during lessons. As school representatives, they were encouraged to play together as a team in their spare time on a weekly basis. The teammates and the game, in particular, might not be their primary choice otherwise. Activity

during the entire program was required to get course credits. In this thesis, the program functioned as access point to active players with a serious interest in videogames. The matches recorded were played in competitive mode, however, not as part of organized events.

Here, researcher immersion was obtained through the in-game screen recordings and corresponding interviews. Through the recordings, conducted by the participants on their own devices, we could observe and re-observe in-game situations. During a number of interviews (see table 1), relevant recordings were discussed with the participants in order to confirm an insider's perspective. The design was informed by the autonomy principle within the ethnographic research (Murphy & Dingwall, 2001), as well as insights into ethnographic research design of case 1 where participants take an active role. The research approach was player centred (e.g. Kiuorti, 2019; Ratan et al, 2015; T. L. Taylor, 2009), which aligns with both ethnography and case-study. The focus was on accessing a participant's perspective of the game in question and this was emphasized by participants being in charge of the screen recordings. Playing in a setting of the participants' own choice and on their own computers was considered a naturally occurring setting (Hammersley, 2018). In most games, visuals are highly relevant to gameplay and how the player perceives the game. The screen recordings the participants produced are a form of audio-visual data of an embodied experience. Accordingly, this study was further influenced by visual ethnography where the visuals are considered of equal relevance as other aspects of the data (Pink, 2013). As discussed, using visual material in interviews can further facilitate a participant's perspective (Barley & Russell, 2018) by video stimulated recall (Nguyen et al, 2013). In game research, video stimulated recall can help the researcher access a player perspective (Pitkänen, 2015).

There were three levels of communication in the data and two of these were provided by CS:GO. The game offered a text-based chat (TBC) with two modes: all chat (notifying all players) and team chat (notifying team only) as well as an internal voice chat (IVC) that was audible to team only. The latter could be considered a bit impractical as the players had to press a key each time they wish to speak. Accordingly, most players used an external voice chat (EVC) to speak with their in-game friends. In the data, both teams used a Discord channel to speak freely without the need to press a key. During matches when not all team members were present, they got assigned a temporary co- player, in-game often referred to by the participants as a 'random', and these co-players are as a rule not invited to the Discord channel. The EVC was used for most in-game communication within the team, with a few exceptions where the IVC and the TBC were used. Henceforth, only the players that were officially part of the team are referred to as team members and players that join them for one match are referred to as co-players.

The participants volunteered to meet up with the me through a teacher and agreed to participate after being informed on what the study entailed. The data consisted of seven matches and four scheduled interviews per team. Initially there were six participants, however, as part of team 1, John became part of the study in the last months of the data collection. The participants recorded and shared their matches regularly with the researcher through a secure file sharing service. The design of the study was dependent on the students' engagement due to the physical distance between the researcher and participants as we are based in different parts of the country. Regular meetings, held at their school, functioned as interviews and were recorded. Stimulated recall (Nguyen et al, 2013; Pitkänen, 2015) on relevant sequences from the screen recordings was employed during all interviews apart from the first. Both teams have submitted wins and losses as well as recordings from various maps.

The analysis focused on one member from both teams (see bolded participants in Table 1); allowing different perspectives on CS:GO. The other participants' points of views functioned as secondary data in situations where the focused upon screen recordings were unclear. The other participants were present in the analysed in-game data and all participants took part in at least two interviews, ensuring that their voices were also heard. Choosing which participants' perspectives to focus on was, largely, influenced by their presence during the interviews as these were the only face-to-face interactions between me as a researcher and participants. The participants on team 1 (T1), Martin (pseudonym), was the sole participant to submit videos of all matches and participate in all interviews, he was also considered the most experienced CS:GO player on T1 (see 4.2). The participants on team 2 (T2) Jesper (pseudonym) took part in all seven matches yet there are only three recordings from his point of view due to technical issues. He was the only participant from T2 to take part in all three interviews. With this selection in mind, a total of ten matches and almost six hours of data (05:44:09), with matches ranging from 27-44 minutes, were analysed for this study. Both teams have submitted wins and losses, resulting in five wins and five losses in total. Seven matches were played on the map called Mirage and the remaining three were played on Dust II, Cache and Overpass. Both teams have submitted recordings from various maps.

Table 2.
Overview of the participation.

	Team 1 (T1)				Team 2 (T2)		
	Martin	John	Joni	William	**Jesper**	Emil	Sebastian
Match 1 May 2017	**x**	-	x	o	**o**	x	x
Match 2 October 2017	**x**	o	x	o	**o**	x	o
Match 3 November 2017	**x**	-	x	x	**o**	x	x
Match 4 December 2017	**x**	o	x	x	**o**	x	x
Match 5 February 2018	**x**	x	x	o	**x**	x	x
Match 6 April 2018	**x**	x	x	o	**x**	x	x
Match 7 May 2018	**x**	x	x	-	**x**	x	x
Interview 1 April 2017	+	-	+	+	+	+	+
Interview 2 September 2017	+	-	-	+	+	-	+
Interview 3 January 2018	+	+	+	-	*	*	*
Interview 4 May 2018	+	+	+	-	+	+	-

X = participated in the match, submitted a screen recording to the researchers
0 = participated in the match, did not submit a screen recording/issues with participant file
+ = participated in interview
- = did not participate
** = cancelled due to seasonal flu*

The in-game screen recordings and the interviews were analysed in parallel, however, in hindsight I see three major phases in our understanding of identity (co)construction for study 2. Firstly, all participants' in-game activity was observed trough the screen recordings and the interviews transcribed as they took place. Secondly, based upon the researchers' initial observations, relevant in-game and interview situations were identified. Three categories of tools for identity (co)construction emerged: skins, choice of weapon and competence/rank. Thirdly, screen recordings and interviews were re-observed and relevant situations were identified. The categories needed clarification and all sequences of the collections were re-analysed until the final categories emerged. Further, the practical-ethical problems that occurred during the process of data collection, analysis and dissemination for study 2 were later discussed in study 3.

5.4 Research design and ethics

The research approach was participant centred and informed by the following ethical principles: non-maleficence (avoid harming participants), beneficence (research should when applicable be beneficial to participants), autonomy or self-determination (participants' decisions should be respected) and justice (participants should be treated equally) (Murphy & Dingwall, 2001). However, while Murphy and Dingwall (2001, p. 347) note that ethical principles should function as a goal to strive towards, they do recommend a reflective stance "given the diversity and flexibility of ethnography". Pink (2013, p. 59, cursive original) supports "a critical approach to the idea that *one* ethical code of conduct could be hierarchically superior to all others". Pink (2013) further advocates developing a reflexive approach to ethnographic work in relation to ethical guidelines and the context. Ethical decisions cannot be made until one is conducting ethnography in situ, as discussed by Russell & Barley (2020).

In the both cases, several steps were taken to avoid that the research was perceived as an intrusion to the participants' privacy (Murphy & Dingwall, 2001); using pseudonyms instead of the participants' real names, and informing participants, parents and teachers of the study's aim and what participation entailed. The information was presented at a level suitable for the students, free of jargon. Further, in both studies, informed consent was not viewed as a singular act but as a process of (re)negotiation (Aarsand & Forsberg, 2010; Pink, 2013; Rusk et al., 2012) involving a continuous collaborative process with the focus participants. For example, to be able to better analyse the social interaction in the data of case 2, I did include Dr Fredrik Rusk in the process as a co-author due to his research expertise in interaction. The participants were informed of this, and through ongoing consent (Quinton & Reynolds, 2018), they approved of the additional

analytical foci that appeared as consequence, see Rusk and Ståhl (2020; 2021) as well as Rusk, Ståhl & Silseht (2020; 2021). Limiting research focus solely on the initial understanding of the context can be limiting and therefore, participant focused research can be opportunity-driven and open to explore that which is made relevant by the participants (Besnier & Philips, 2017).

In case 1, the data is personal and tightly connected to the everyday lives of the participants. Several steps were taken to ensure that the participants felt that they have control of the material. First, the students volunteered to be part of the study after being informed on what the study entailed. Secondly, rather than gaining access to the content of their phones we chose a technical solution where we mirror the screens of the mobile phones. This way we can only see what the participants allows us to see. Further, the mirroring software was participant controlled and the participants were given the possibility to shut down the mirroring if something happened on the screen that they did not wish for us to see. Thirdly, before showing any material to an audience outside the research project, the specific material is sent to the participants and the material is only shown with the consent of the participant. The participant has given her permission to use the images and quotes in paper 1 and these summary chapters.

In case 2, the participants were given control of the data (Murphy & Dingwall, 2001) in that they volunteered to be part of the study and handled the screen recording software, thereby, deciding which matches to send to the researchers through an encrypted and secure file sharing service. They were instructed to send a certain number of matches, including both wins and losses and preferably varying maps, otherwise the decision on which matches to send was theirs. The participants were also given control of parts of the data when, before showing any in-game data to an audience outside the research project, the specific data was double-checked for participant consent. Only data with the consent from the participants is shown. Through study 1, the researchers had prior experience of this approach, and the participants have given their permission to use the images and quotes in these summary chapters as well as in study 2 and 3. Furthermore, there were instances during the screen recordings when the participants discussed what kind of content was appropriate to record. This provided the researchers with the opportunity to clarify their intentions and discuss details of the research design together with the participants.

In both cases, the excerpts have been translated into English by the researchers, except for statements originally in English. The interview excerpts have been translated with a focus on content and readability, and efforts were made to convey the same points stressed by the participants. In terms of detail and nuance, the translation becomes part of the analysis (Hepburn & Bolden, 2012) and we have therefore employed two-line transcripts for the in-game data in study 2 and 3; the original statements

are presented together with an English translation. Readers with an understanding of Swedish and/or Finnish can find the original statements helpful, however, most readers are limited to the researcher's translation. Additionally, me and my co-author have employed our insight into the researched context and language used in online gaming contexts when translating into English. Further, it is the original statements that were analysed, not the translations.

Finally, the question of handling usernames is relevant in both cases. Usernames, or gamertags, are pseudonyms, chosen by the users themselves and is the name or handle through which the user is recognized online (Sveningsson, 2003; Zhou et al, 2021). In study 1, all usernames have been removed and replaced with the generic “Tumblruser” and “Instagramuser”. In order to offer the reader as authentic view as possible of the data, other information has not been edited but appear as it was on the screen of the mobile phone as Maria was viewing it. Since they were deemed to small and of too poor quality to identify the person in them, the profile images have not been altered. In study 2, all usernames or gamertags have been altered (the participants) or removed (non-participants, as well as some player icons have been altered, in order to secure the participants’ privacy.

It is impossible to, as a researcher, completely avoid influencing the research context, although the participants had primary control of the data collection. Through comments made by the participants in study 2, while I was not attending the match as it took place, it becomes evident that I as a researcher was still present. For example, in case 2, team 2 discussed whether or not they were allowed to swear when recording and team 1 joked about what certain sounds might sound like when the recording was playing on my computer. Correspondingly, as a researcher, I have continuously reflected upon the effects of my presence (Sveningsson, 2003) and the effects that might have. The research design eliminated the physical presence of a researcher and, can thereby, minimize the feeling of intrusion and invasiveness (Aarsand & Forsberg, 2010). Additionally, unlike a public live stream than anyone can access, the participants recorded the matches with insight into who would have access to the recording, thereby lessening the performativity of the situation. Further, despite the recording, the participant can be less hesitant or guarded (Rusk et al, 2012; Rusk et al, 2014), as the participants have agency and control over what, how and when they record.

Further, the research design provided the participants with agency through a collaboration with researchers and the power differential between researcher and participant was reduced as the participants themselves administered the data collection (Pink, 2013; Russell & Barley, 2020). In study 2, however, the design also put emphasis on team communication and collaboration as the team themselves had to reach a unanimous decision on which recording to send. The participants had

access to screen recording software through the esports programme, however, not all participants had used it prior to the study. Apart from in-game exclamations of joy as certain unusual sequences were documented; during an interview, one participant pointed out that he now was able to record his own games and, subsequently, he now posted certain highlights online. In further terms of participant reciprocity (Murphy & Dingwall, 2001; N. Taylor, 2016) the participants' interest in video games was legitimized as it was the focus of a research project.

6. IN SUMMARY

6. In summary

The main results of the three studies are summarised in this chapter. The first two provides empirical discussion on participant identity construction and engagement with Instagram, Tumblr respectively CS:GO based on the two different cases. Further, the third study deals with some methodological perspectives on the data collection, analysis and dissemination in regard to study 2.

6.1 Study 1: Exploring visual communication and competencies through interaction with images in social media

The first study approaches identity construction through visual communication, here by interacting with longer-lasting images in social media. Further, the study approaches the conditions that frame identity (co)construction by analysing the active competencies in such interaction. Focusing on one focus student in case 1, from an upper secondary school in Finland, the ethnographic data consisted of 41 images that the participant interacted with, by liking or sharing them, on Tumblr and Instagram during school time. The data collection was conducted during 3-5 consecutive days once a year during the focus students three years in upper secondary school. Three interviews functioned as secondary data.

The focus was informed by visual ethnography (Pink, 2011; 2013) and the analysis was organized according to Barthes (1982) different levels of messages in visual material. The analysis showed that by interacting with images on social media, the participant (co)constructed identities with the communities on Instagram respectively on Tumblr. In the study, this is referred to as communicating a certain online persona. However, to better reflect the theoretical framework that evolved throughout the process of this thesis and for coherency in terms of terminology, this will henceforth be referred to as identity (co)construction.

The images the participant interacted with were primarily photographs with various visible levels of editing. In terms of colour, the images range from a photorealistic palette to clearly altered; by being enhanced, darkened or as a play with contrasts. In terms of content, there were images with both artefacts and phenomena as well as landscapes, however, the majority of the images were categorized as containing people (n = 24). Women were in majority on these images and further, the majority of these contained images of people with similar ethnicity as the participant (white). A few images were unspecific in terms of ethnicity and/or race and none clearly displayed a different ethnicity/race than the participants. While this can be a result of the participants offline communities being predominantly

white, it can also be attributed towards a white ideal of beauty in western society. Based on an analysis of the non-coded iconic message of these images (Barthe's, 1982) we noted that the images communicated a sense of wanting to belong to a community while others communicated wanting to be seen as different from mainstream society. Further, some images communicated a desire to inspire social change whereas others communicated a desire to experience. The participant referred to some of the images as "pretty images", that primarily to her had the function of maintaining an active Tumblr profile. Accordingly, together with her peers, the participant (co)constructed an identity of an active Tumblr user where images have different value. Accordingly, while some images have a mere decorative value, others have greater importance. While there was a desire to refrain from mainstream society, there was simultaneously a desire to be part of the Tumblr community, a community that for example values originality over mass production.

Further, the analysis showed that the participants identity (co)construction was framed by four active competencies: visual competency, technical competency, knowledge of social norms and knowledge of self. The competencies presented in the study echoed characteristics of what other scholars refer to as 21st century skills (see e.g. Kereluik et al, 2013) or competencies that will be essential in the future. Visual competency, elsewhere discussed as visual literacy, entails understanding visual communication as artefacts created in a specific context with a certain audience and goal in mind. Further, the ability to effectively and thoughtfully evaluate, navigate, and construct information using a range of digital technologies and thus to function fluently in a digital world is seen as an essential skillset for the future. Understanding the norms of specific communities is central for knowing how to communicate within that community while simultaneously being aware of various individual perspectives and potentially conflicting interests. Finally, insights into one's own personal preferences, biases and actions are not only tightly connected to identity (co)construction, but also to the other competencies discussed. Correspondingly, we (Ståhl & Kaihovirta, 2019) claimed that these competencies, and potentially additional ones, should be acknowledged in the educational discourse on the use of social media.

Interaction with, whether through liking or sharing, certain images and not others is a conscious choice made by the participant. By doing so, she (co)constructs identities on Tumblr and Instagram. In comparison to synchronous interaction within offline communities, the individual has greater control of (co)constructing identities on social media. Further, the identities (co)constructed are more or less connected to offline identities varying on the platform. The participants profile on both Tumblr and Instagram were at the time open to the public, and therefore, the participant did not directly manage the community within which she

(co)constructed identities. Together with the online communities, she (co)constructs a feminine, tech savvy and non-judgmental identity with a sense of humour and an awareness for contemporary society. The focus of this study was to address how it is (co)constructed rather than discuss how this identity was connected to the participants offline identities.

6.2 Study 2: Player customization, competence and team discourse: exploring player identity (co)construction in Counter-Strike: Global Offensive

The second study approaches identity construction from the perspective of players within online gaming. Online gaming, which previously used to be a spare time activity, has now become professional and educational contexts, as exemplified in this study. Player identities, here framed by both professional and educational contexts, are (co)constructed in and through the in-game interaction with both the game itself, as well as with co-players. The aim of the study was to explore local player identity (co)construction in CS:GO within an esports and educational context.

In this ethno-case study, a player centred approach offered a participant's perspective on local player identity (co)construction in the multiplayer FPSs Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (CS:GO). This study was organized around two perspectives on identity (co)construction. Firstly, to discuss what tools framed the participants identity (co)construction within CS:GO and second to explore what characterized their (co)construction of player identities. The data was collected in collaboration with a vocational school with an esports programme in Finland in 2017-2018. Seven students (aged 17-18, all white and identifying as male) playing CS:GO took part in the study by sharing screen recordings of their in-game matches (ten matches and almost six hours in total) and by taking part in interviews (seven in total). The participants were part of two teams and the in-game data was analysed from two students' perspectives, one from each team.

Based on the participants' in-game discussions and interviews, relevant situations in relation to identity (co)construction were transcribed and analysed inductively. The participants employed the following tools for identity (co)construction in CS:GO; choice of weapon, weapon skill, weapon customization, stats/rank and language use. These tools were employed to (co)construct identities connected to player customization, competence and team discourse. Although there are individual variances, the identities (co)constructed orient towards a perceived competent player identity shaped by technomasculine norms in online game culture, where traits that connote femininity and queerness are seen as signs of incompetence.

Although customization is limited within CS:GO, especially in comparison to games such as MMORPGS, the participants used the tools within the game context for constructing various player identities. Rank

was oriented to as an indicator for player competence and the in-game status that was associated with a high player rank helped create mentor-apprentice relationships. Likewise, match statistics were perceived as an instrument for situated player performance. In particular, the number of kills defined how well a player was performing. These instrumental ranking systems, part of the game design, were continuously oriented to as relevant by the participants and gave certain status to those rated as high performing by these systems. Thereby, these in-game features became tools for (co)constructing competent (or incompetent) player identities reaching beyond the in-game context. While the game context, with possibilities and limitations, shape the in-game experience, so does the online game culture and the norms associated with it. The study connects this to technomasculinity shaping not only player culture but also the game industry (Johnson, 2018). The ideal esports player appears to be male, white, heterosexual and competitive (Witkowski, 2013; 2018), traits that align with the ideals visible in technomasculinity. The two in-game roles that appeared to be particularly desirable were the AWP:er and the entry fragger, as taking on either of these roles is associated with a high status, both in-game and out, and were thereby part of constructing competent and competitive player identities.

The all-male group of participants was not a choice made by the researchers, but supposedly a result of the predominantly male online game culture resulting in few female students in the esports programme. In the data, participants presumed all players to be men unless a gamer tag or their voice hinted that the participants needed to re-evaluate such an assumption. While the participants stated to welcome female players, they did note that the online game culture in CS:GO might not be supporting of female identifying players. In terms of visuality, all characters in CS:GO are male and skins with masculine connotations appear to be the norm. Therefore, using gender-neutral skins can be seen as taking a stance against the norm of technomasculinity within online game culture. Further, the study discusses offensive language as part of the (co)constructed player identities impacting the team discourse, as both participants as well as random co-players and opponents engaged in so called "gamer lingo" (Pulos, 2013): using slurs against women and homosexual men. However, there were individual tendencies to use, and not use, certain words. Thereby, while offensive language can be considered "a game within the game" (Vossen, 2018), not all participants took part in such a practice. Some players even took a stance against this norm by pointing out toxicity within the team. While there was a prominent tendency to use words with either queer or female connotations in order to describe the players one considered provoking, and despite racism being an issue in online gaming (Nakamura, 2009; Gray, 2018), here racial slurs were few. In fact, when an opponent uttered a racial slur, the participants were quick to react by

pointing out the language as racist. While the participants appeared to agree that being agitated in-game does not condone racism, they were not as critical towards language use potentially reflecting misogyny and/or homophobia.

The technomasculine ideal and gamer lingo present in the data are in stark contrast to educational values such as democracy and inclusion. The study conclude with us (Ståhl & Rusk) maintaining that excluding commercial games such as CS:GO from educational contexts might not only limit the students access to a social learning platform that they might find authentic and motivating. By including such games in educational contexts, there is further a possibility to address the problematic ideals and language use within online gaming. Further, while a FPS such as CS:GO has less options for player customizations than other genres, that is not the main constraining factor. In fact, player identity construction is to a higher degree limited by the online game culture shaped by esports and competitiveness. It appears that, since the norm dictates that the ideal esports player is cis-gendered male, white, heterosexual and competitive, player identity construction needs to reflect these values in order not to break the norm. Constructing identities outside of this ideal is currently met with resistance and access to online game culture remains limited for those that do not fit these criteria. While competitiveness is to a certain degree to be expected in an esports setting, we argue that all esports organizations have a responsibility to support and encourage sportsmanship.

6.3 Study 3: Maintaining participant integrity - ethics and fieldwork in online video games

The third study was methodologically oriented and discus employing ethnographic methods in online research. Such a toolkit can be employed to better understand contemporary society in general but also how online environments are connected to a specific context, in this case education. This study discusses some of the challenges the authors faced during the research process of study 2. The challenges revolved around maintaining participant integrity in terms of; a) gaining informed consent from players that became co-observed, b) defining privacy online during the analysis as well as in the published results and c) portraying participants accurately despite stakeholder interests. The intention with the study, was not for us as authors (Ståhl & Rusk) to portray our approach as best practice, but rather to highlight and discuss the challenges we faced during the fieldwork and analysis, as well as during the reporting of the findings.

The ethno-case study (Parker-Jenkins, 2018) design that informed study 2 and was discussed in study 3 relied upon the involvement of the participants and their willingness to document their gameplay. This resulted in data taking place within a naturally occurring setting

(Hammersley, 2018) and where the multiple insider perspectives of the same situation proved invaluable to the analysis. The screen recordings did in fact not only capture what happened in-game, but also the team internal interaction through the external voice chat and the identity (co)construction that happened on both platforms, often in parallel. Through video-stimulated recall during the interviews, discussion on certain gameplay sequences provided further insiders' comments on the events.

Here, maintaining active participant integrity overruled the interests of the passive participants (the co-observed random co-players and opponents). Due to the risk of negative repercussions towards the focus participants, we opted for not informing all players of the screen recordings. This solution avoids potential harm towards the participants, however, their co-players and opponents are unaware of being part of our research data. Although fairly uncommon in educational research, there is a tradition of differentiating between active and passive participants in ethnography as well as online research (Quinton and Reynolds, 2018). The passive participants are, however, not focused on in our analysis and the ethical difficulties can therefore be considered moderate (Beneito-Montagut, 2011). Although making a difference between active and passive participants is uncommon in educational ethnographic research, it might function as a tool for future research endeavours. This is not achieved by applying a 'one size fits all'-approach, but rather a reflective stance regarding ethical considerations (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Pink, 2013). Correspondingly, we differentiated between the participants as two different groups that need to be considered separately. When ethics are managed in situ (Russell & Barley, 2020), the researcher might find it easier to ensure that the interests and privacy of all groups are considered through this, more dynamic, research design.

While there are various practices in terms of protecting the participants' online identities; from removing all personal information to slightly editing the content yet still reflecting the original concept, neither was ideal here. The discussion of, to edit, or not to edit, in order to maintain participant integrity revolved around the gamertags for both active and passive participants. As the gamertag is the player's chosen name in-game, it is part of the player's gameplay experience. Editing the gamertags might result in loss of meaning and affect the authenticity of data and, thereby, the quality of the research. Due to the school's visibility online, including the students' personal information in combination with their gamertags, the use of the original (unedited) gamertags was not an option. With anonymized participants, transparency in terms of the research process becomes central for the credibility of user centred research. If analysing edited gamertags, those might intentionally, or unintentionally, have been altered to reflect certain results. Analysing the original gamertags, but reporting

the altered version, would have resulted in limited transparency and thereby credibility. As the importance of usernames have been discussed elsewhere (Sveningsson, 2003), we decided to prioritize participant integrity. When conducting research online, the participants online identities adds an additional layer of personal information for the researcher(s) to handle.

It can be argued that the sole justification for collecting data is that the research findings will be shared through publication (Swedish research council, 2017). This includes sharing of the results, not only with academia, but also with the general public. When reporting research findings, the researchers should bear participant vulnerability in mind. Especially so when reporting on highly personal data such as participants' own screens (Paakkari, 2020) due to the intimate nature of a mobile device with presence in both private and public spheres (Hjorth & Lim, 2012). Research on new digital phenomena tends to gain public interest (Quinton & Reynolds, 2018), which puts further emphasis on representing the studied phenomenon and context as fairly as possible, for everyone involved. There is, in other words, a need to avoid normative approaches (Bennerstedt el al, 2012; Bennerstedt, 2013) despite different stakeholders' interest in generating certain results. In this case, there were stakeholders with conflicting interests in portraying the context in a specific light and putting emphasis on certain aspects of the data. Despite competing power differentials, we wanted to convey the complexity of the data as accurately as possible, without taking sides and while considering the participants' vulnerability. Further, as video gaming as a hobby is continuously stigmatized, a research project focusing on the participants' interests in video games legitimized their hobby.

As discussed in study 2, technomasculinity (Johnson, 2018) is the norm within online gaming, which can explain why players of online games feel justified expressing certain language and maintaining a power structure where they are on the top. As this is true for the online game community as a whole, stressing this behaviour solely among the participants would be unjust, irresponsible and unproductive for the larger discussion on the issue. By vilifying the participants, we would not have fairly represented the phenomena we studied (Quinton & Reynolds, 2018). This does not mean that we condone the use of homophobic, misogynistic and offensive language, but we need to describe the context transparently and responsibly for both the reader and the study's participants. By discussing our findings in relation to current research on online games, we can illuminate the larger structures at work. By doing so, we can question that offensive language as 'gamer lingo' (Pulos, 2013) is taken for granted in online games and highlight the segregation that technomasculinity enables, while also showing that there are voices, in the gaming community, that question this language use.

Study 3 concludes with a discussion on the practical-ethical challenges in relation to both the research context and managing research ethics in situ together with the participants. We argue that when employing ethnographic methods, partially or entirely, online, one might face challenges to maintaining participant integrity in manners that are not necessarily covered by current ethical guidelines. Although a fixed set of rules for conducting research online might be counterproductive, we do recognize the need for further discussion on the topic of ethically sound research. In a research project like this, a case-based and process-focused ethical framework can be considered optimal. Consent is then seen as an on-going process in an iterative-inductive approach that emphasizes the importance of addressing and resolving ethical aspects that arise in situ (Pink, 2013; Russell & Barley, 2020) and in each stage of the process (Markham & Buchanan, 2012; Quinton & Reynolds, 2018). A laboriously developed ethically-informed stance towards data generation will thus be necessary, as will continuous dialogue between researchers and participants—on the focus and purpose of the data collection.

7. DISCUSSION

7. Discussion

In the final chapter of this thesis, I discuss the findings in relation to the research interests explored in the introduction. Here in section 7.1-7.3, the participants identity (co)construction (RQ2) is discussed through the frames that shape the options for identity construction; visuality, community and diversity (RQ1). Taken together, they provide insight into what contemporary identity construction in online/offline communities entail. They present a picture of who gets seen in online communities that are continuously more professionalised. This picture offers an insight into what identities are encouraged and discouraged, and as a result; *who* is possible online. The norms discussed here impacts both those marginalized and those welcomed, online as well as offline. In section 7.4, some methodological reflections and implications for the study is then discussed (RQ3). The final section, 7.5, is a comment on my researcher identity, shaped by the process presented in this thesis, and going forward.

7.1 Identities (co)constructed: visuality

In terms of visuality, the participants identity (co)construction is framed by two connected levels; platform representation and participant agency. In terms of platform representation, visuality is highly connected to technological affordances. For example, the nine-image grid on Instagram is considered the main feed and is thereby part of the static visual representation of the platform. The user has agency over the content in these images, but not how they are presented and cannot re-order them after publication. A similar collection of nine images can be employed on Tumblr as well and is then referred to as a mood board or #MyAestethic (Goding-Doty, 2020). However, the user is not restricted to this format. Accordingly, similar visual formats can both be a static form of platform representation on on platform, and a form of participant agency on another.

The user visual agency here is highly shaped by what Manovich (2017) refers to as Instagramism, and in particular, designed photography. Designed photography is a visual format employed online where traditional rules of good photography, such as recommendations of image depth and photo-realistic colour use, are ignored. Another central trait of Instagramism is the awareness of sequentially and creating a coherent profile, referred to as an aesthetic. In the interviews, the participant continuously mentioned which images that would and would not, according to her, fit well together. Interestingly, this comment was not however stated in relation to her Instagram profile, but in regard to her Tumblr feed of reblogged images. The concept of a coherent aesthetic, be it on a feed or profile, focusing on a particular theme clearly shape the contemporary online visual landscape. Further, it is noteworthy that conventional

photography currently informs visual art education. In order for our students to be visually literate (Famhy et al, 2014) on Instagram, we need to include awareness of designed photography in our curriculum. Any student with an online presence needs the tools to be able to critically reflect on the visual culture around them, including that of one of the current major social media platforms.

Neither the environment nor the characters are customizable in CS:GO and the platform is thereby highly shaped by static visual representations. Further, these are portrayed in a what the game developers considered a 'realistic' manner and the game includes no fantastical elements. Due to the limited customizability, previously research endeavours on visual identity construction has focused on other game genres than FPSs, for example games where the user can engage with customizable avatars of different fictitious races (see eg. Corneliussen, 2008). However, CS:GO do include tools for visual agency for the participants, such as skins, stickers and renaming a weapon. A weapon skin does not affect any other properties of the weapon beyond that how it looks in-game; both for the player wielding it as well for as other players. The participants expressed various views on skins. Some participants noted that skins can make one feel more confident, whereas other did not find them very meaningful and instead used stickers (in-game decals) to decorate their weapons.

The skins that the participants wielded, tended to be of designs with masculine connotations based on their shapes, lines and colours (see e.g. Longstreet et al, 2021). The skins were technological or military in design, with colour palettes with masculine or gender-neutral connotations. For one of the participants, skins appeared central to his player identity as he had made a profit on trading skins and noted when a team member had purchased a new skin. While the participants had different preferences regarding the type and amount of skins they owned, all of them oriented towards skins as meaningful. For example, one participant picked up an opponent's weapon solely for its uncommon combination of skin and stickers, and then got irritated when an opponent did the same. This suggests that weapons with skins can be considered war trophies and obtaining one might disrupt the in-game performance of the opponent.

From the perspective of visual agency, FPSs such as CS:GO does offers limited player customization, especially in comparison to MMORPGs (see e.g. Corneliussen, 2008). Avatars can be seen as "the material to work with" in a virtual world (TL Taylor, 2009, p.110). However, while the characters are not customizable (and thereby not avatars according to Shaw, 2014), that does not equate with FPSs being without material to work with. After all, the first-person perspective offers high player immersion and possibilities for constructing in-game identities through the players' "own eyes" (Mukherjee, 2012). However, in order to explore those venues for identity construction, we need to see beyond the bodily presentations such

as the customizable avatar. By claiming so, I do not wish diminish the importance of customizability and representation among avatars. Rather, I advocate a perspective on identity construction that includes all tools that are meaningful for the user. Additionally, I wish to stress how these forms of identity (co)construction are connected to online and offline communities. For example, while skins with a pink colour palette is technically a possibility as it is available for purchase, social norms limit use of such tools due to the female connotations.

While the platforms provide different tools for visual representation, the participants visual agency was not solely limited by these tools. Here, visual identity (co)construction is more than bodily representations, such as selfies or avatars. While bodily visual representations do matter, they are not the sole indicator on who is visually possible online.

7.2 Identities (co)constructed: community

The technological affordances of the different platforms are tightly interwoven with the community online as well as the connected offline communities. On a superficial level, social media platforms such as Instagram and Tumblr appear similar as they are both organized around images. However, the technological affordances that Instagram is organized around, take for example the 'real-name emphasis' (Leaver & Highfield, 2018), encourages the user to connect their online communities with their offline ones. In comparison, the technological affordance of 'pseudonymity' creates limited connection between Tumblr and offline communities and any such connections are a conscious choice by the user.

The different platforms also represent two different perspectives on user authorship, which affects both the online community as well as the potential for identity construction. Tumblr advocates reblogging as a technological affordance and was the first social media platform to offer this feature (Proferes & Morissey, 2020). However, posting an image from another user's Instagram profile on one´s own was not an option at the time of the data collection (2015-2017), nor is it at the end of 2021. While one can currently share an image from another person's profile in a private message or post it as a temporary Instastory, Instagram prohibits its users from directly sharing another person's content on one's own feed. There are numerous options for additional software where this is possible and where the original poster is mentioned. However, these software options are not an official feature of Instagram, reflecting a focus on individuality over collaboration in some contemporary social media (Jenkins et al, 2016). Accordingly, the technical affordances of Tumblr acknowledge not only authorship in terms of certain content, but also the potential for collaboration as well through curatorship; an activity that can be highly meaningful (Hendry, 2020). On the other hand, authorship also signals

accountability in terms of the content created or curated (Jenkins et al, 2016). Further, curatorship can function as identity (co)construction; where the identity constructed by the original poster is either acknowledged or questioned by those reblogging the image. By reblogging other users' content on one's own feed, the curator either embrace or distance themselves from such an identity, resulting in an identity that is (co)constructed by multiple users.

All platforms and their respective communities are further shaped by norms of legitimate participation. As I will get back to, legitimate participation on Instagram and CS:GO is connected to offline communities. On Tumblr, legitimate participation is not necessarily connected to offline connections, but rather in terms of content. Here, legitimate participation can be considered a balance between keeping posting regularly to be seen as an active member while adhering to norms of 'suitable' content (Kanai et al, 2019). On platforms with an offline connection such as Instagram, identity construction is correspondingly connected with a potential loss of face in communities beyond the platform. Online visibility among one's offline peers might create a sense of accountability for online and offline identities to correspond, otherwise the profile is considered 'fake' (Arfini, et al, 2021). Further, user engagement through numerical values such as the number of friends or the number of likes and comments a post receives can then perceived as a numerical measure of how popular one is (Yau & Reich, 2018). Apart from the social value, these online communities are also inhabited with digital influencers for whom such engagement has monetary value. Their activity online is thereby highly shaped by competition with other users, influencers and content creators (Tifentale, 2016). Unlike conventional celebrities, these trendsetters are considered to be 'real' people and companies then harness the perceived legitimacy of these influencers in marketing collaborations (de Brito Silva et al, 2020).

Due to the social implications of liking, or in particular not liking, an image, the participant consciously liked the same image twice posted on two different accounts. While 'potentially unflattering content' is not technically hindered by the technological affordances of Instagram, the connection to offline communities along with visible numbers of likes guides the user to align with online norms. Therefore, segmented relations and biases from offline life can influence online communities. Accordingly, the liberating potential of online life predicted by, for example, Turkle (1995) is difficult to achieve on 'real-name' platforms when one is more or less constrained by one's offline identity categories. Accordingly, the options and limitations in terms of what identities one is allowed to claim is not only individual preferences and aspirations, but also set from others in that community.

While the participants in CS:GO did not use their offline names as usernames or gamer tags, all individual team members knew at least of each

other from an offline context. As in-game success is affected by their efforts, both as a group and as individuals, this resulted in an accountability of online activity to offline connections (Rusk & Ståhl, 2021). The participants were highly focused on (co)constructing what they perceived as a competent player (thereby a legitimate participant) identity utilizing various tools. However, they primarily employed technological affordances with connections to the online community; including both their own peer group and the in-game community as a whole (TL Taylor, 2015). For example, the participants did orient towards in-game statistics such as stats and rank as relevant indicators of player competence, both their own as well as randomly assigned co-players. Further, one team explicitly (co)constructed certain team members as less or more competent as the role of the AWP:er was based on their situated skill with that particular weapon.

The ideal of a level playing field, where skill is perceived as the sole factor of relevance, is highly pervasive in gaming communities (Harper, 2014). Thereby, the core of the in-game community consists of those with the highest level of skill and are thereby acknowledged as the central figures of that community of practice. The participants frowned upon weapons they considered low skilled routes to victory, similar to player reaction to certain characters in fighting games (Harper, 2014). Using such weapons were perceived to threaten the level playing field and disrupting the participants normative gameplay. However, apart from competent player identities, there were also other identities (co)constructed. For example, one of the participants was highly focused on being perceived as a skin connoisseur, simultaneously as he gradually became more independent in-game (Rusk, Ståhl & Silseth, 2020; 2021).

Professionalization online and competitiveness is currently more discussed and acknowledged in relation to competitive gaming, both in the academic discourse as well as general society. However, as discussed here, both social media and online video games can be highly focused on who is and is not a legitimate participant. Additionally, questions of legitimacy do not only shape the users, but the platform as a whole, for example, esports has continuously needed to legitimatise itself in relation to traditional sports (Anderson-Coto et al, 2019). Regarding user identities, when offline communities are intertwined with online communities, the offline identities affect the online identities an individual can construct. When legitimate participation online is determined by popularity on social media or perceived player competence in online games, the playing field becomes uneven. When certain offline identity categories affect an individual's access to online identities, they correspondingly limit the individual's potential to reach the core of the community and being seen as a legitimate participant. This in turn reflects back to the offline community, in this case their respective schools, and might affect their acceptance and wellbeing

there. Further, as argued by Steinkuehler and Oh (2012), insights from naturally occurring online communities can be fruitful when designing formal learning platforms online.

7.3 Identities (co)constructed: diversity

The identities (co)constructed by the participants were highly shaped by normative gendered ideals. Such ideals are present both through the representation present on the platform, as well as user agency and the identities they can (co)construct. However, the technological affordance of respective platform emphasizes different aspects of this ideal.

Offline norms such as the white able-bodied slim cis-gendered heterosexual ideal are also present online (Webb et al, 2019), especially on platforms such as Instagram that are connected to offline contexts. The selfie is often associated with vanity, but the visual format of the selfie can either adhere to normative standards of beauty or challenge them (see e.g. Tiidenberg, 2020). However, the lack of selfies here does not equate to a lack of possibilities for critical self-expression or empowering marginalized groups. Additionally, apart from posting selfies of one's own, engaging with other people's selfies provides the original poster with acceptance. By engaging with a selfie that challenges normative beauty ideals, the user thereby supports the statement in questions. This potential is however not limited to selfies. Rather, meaningful tools for identity construction, through self-expression or advocating change, vary depending on the platform. Selfies might be a useful tool on Instagram, but that does not automatically transfer to other platforms. The technological affordances on Tumblr offers the user more agency, and can therefore employ self-expression through photos as well as text-based posts, videos and GIFs. Therefore, selfies should be seen as one potential tool in a larger toolkit for identity (co)construction on social media platforms that can either conform to or reject the prevalent norm.

None of the images the participant engaged with on Instagram nor Tumblr clearly included a person of colour. Additionally, all bodies align with a slim beauty ideal, including offline acquaintances as well as influencers. Solely two images commented upon the slim able-bodied beauty ideal; the first was a humorous montage of a (blonde white slim) woman continuously eating despite her friends "showing off their summer bodies" and the second a (blonde white slim) young woman sitting flamboyantly on a rough wooden surface which allegedly had resulted in some splinters in her bottom. In both cases, self-deprecating humour is utilized to illustrate the creators struggle with self-regulating to this body ideal. Although eating in the photos, the woman if the first example remains slim. While the process of creating the second photo was potentially hurtful, the woman did manage to showcase herself as able-bodied. By engaging

with such images, the user thereby (co)construct an identity of white slim able-bodied femininity together with the original posters. These images exemplify the balancing act mentioned by Kanai et al (2019) of, with a humorous tone, challenging the normative body ideal of social media while simultaneously adhering to it.

Through technological affordances such as pseudonymity, Tumblr is seen as a more progressive, inclusive platform and a counter public to normative beauty ideals (see e.g. McCracken et al, 2020). By choosing what kind of content is and is not visible on one's feed, it is possible to create a safe space to explore with likeminded people without the norms of the surrounding society. However, this progressiveness both is and is not present here. On one hand, Tumblr can be understood as a white-centred platform where the boys are shirtless conduits for heterosexual feminine desire, yet on the other hand, the participant also engaged with text-based posts advocating tolerance and inclusion. While managing the content one is exposed to can be a way to avoid negativity and harassment, it can also be used to create homogenous echo-chambers or online bubbles with a stagnated discussion and limited information (Sirola et al, 2021). For example, race sensitive groups online can still face issues with homophobia, and separate online spaces allows some men to be undisturbed in their expressions of hate and romanticize terrorist attack against women. While an echo-chamber of mascara-heavy lashes and flower crowns can be considered harmless in comparison to for example 'incel' terrorist attacks (BBC, 2020), such content often re-produces a white slim able-bodied beauty ideal. On the other hand, reblogging 'decorative images' might be a way to maintain an active Tumblr profile while still having access to a progressive content and educational opportunities. Given Tumblr's position as a platform for addressing and discussing social injustices, one might wish to be part of the community without risking to become the centre of attention for the negative policing, the 'call out culture'. Further, Tumblr has a United States centric bias (Calhoun, 2020), which affects the topics and politics that are discussed on the platform. While a person from Finland can feel empathetic towards marginalized groups in another continent, one might be hesitant towards engaging in a discussion anchored in a context one has limited insight into.

Competitive gaming is simultaneously shaped by different norms, both from within and outside of the gaming community. Like online game culture in general, CS:GO is highly shaped by the ideal of a level playing field simultaneously as the default player is considered a white young cis-gendered heterosexual man. The phenomenon of a technomasculine ideal as can be seen as barriers or obstacles on a supposedly level playing field. From the lens of a community of practice framework where the most celebrated participants make up the core of the community, it is also possible to conceptualize it as a race to the middle where different players

start from various lengths to the core. Players representing different identity categories face different numbers of obstacles to get in-game acknowledgement (Harper, 2014). This issue might stem from the game industry being considered a masculine forum and by solely employing those that fit the 'default player', the industry continues to reinforce the ideal and reproduce similar content (Johnson, 2018). Here, the two most popular roles within the game echoed the analysis of Orlando and Voorhees (2018). The roles of the entry fragger and the AWP:er resonate with the two different sides to the gamerbro ideal presented by N Taylor (2018), displaying techno-muscular power and keen rationality respectively.

On the other hand, there is the stigmatization of games in general society. Gaming is highly shaped by its past as a subculture and where the community wrestles with the implications of being infiltrated by the masses and potential loss of uniqueness (TL Taylor, 2015). While technomasculinity is connected to social status in games, it is simultaneously rebutted and even stigmatized in mainstream culture where the masculine ideal is more connected to athleticism (TL Taylor, 2015). As young men with 'geek sensibilities' can be marginalized and stigmatized in non-game contexts (Maloney et al, 2019), they might feel entitled to certain privileges within 'their own' communities. Then, the presence of non-default players is seen as an intrusion. One group of players they perceive as non-default are women, which are seen as less able and women therefore have to overcome more obstacles in order to receive the same amount of acknowledgement. While the participants here acknowledged that female players are harassed in-game, they did not question if the idea of a level playing field is accurate. This echoes some of the discourse on r/gaming that is not overtly sexist and can express sympathy for individual women being harassed in-game, yet simultaneously refuse to see the gender structures underlying such behaviour (Maloney et al, 2019). Here, the participants in case 2 did not express any thoughts to whether they, individuals who fit the ideal for a default player, have any potential benefits. If situated skill is a requirement for participating on equal terms, then female players will continue to be marginalized as their access is currently limited. Some female players might never bother to prove their skill and due to the prevalent gender norms, they tend to rate their skills as inferior to their male counterparts, whether accurate or not (Ratan et al, 2015). Further, by using homophobic and/or misogynistic slurs for players who do not act according to one's normative play, players reinforce the stereotype that neither women nor homosexual men have a place in competitive gaming. Such language use is currently normalized in online gaming and considered a gamer lingo (Pulos, 2013). In a sense, online gaming, here exemplified through CS:GO, become echochambers of techno-masculine ideals, entertaining misogynist, racist and homophobic values.

However, not all participants in study 2 engaged in such a discourse and there were occasions where the players questioned in-game toxicity. This echoes the notion of tension between different stances within the gaming community, previously described by TL Taylor (2015) and Maloney et al (2019). Accordingly, while technomasculinity is currently shaping the identities (co)constructed in online gaming, there are also those who are questioning and refraining from such an ideal. However, in order to research this changing ideal within games, Maloney et al (2019) claim the researcher cannot view the gaming community as a 'hive mind'. Rather, they advocate that the researchers should pay attention to the nuances; not solely analysing a sexist remark, but also noting the mixed reactions. After all, due to the changing nature of online games in general and competitive gaming in particular, Reitman et al (2020) argue that we as researchers are part of shaping the culture we research. As discussed, similar to what we can see in case 2, researchers (see e.g. Maloney et al, 2019) argue that technomasculinity is currently being openly contested and this might result in a more welcoming atmosphere for marginalised players. To encourage such a change, further emphasis should be placed on supporting especially young players and their mental wellbeing. Here, the results of study 2 were shared with the educators at the school in questions, and efforts have since been made to make the esports program more inclusive. For example, equality is now emphasized in the description of the program. Just like Ahmed & Madrid-Morales (2021), I note that for change to happen within online communities, this change should also happen within the connected offline communities. I therefore encourage my fellow gamers, developers, critics and researchers to avoid an implicit distinction between the games that count and those that do not. Between the *players* that count and those that do not.

7.4 Methodology – reflections and implications

From a methodological perspective, this thesis has been shaped by two discussions. The first was regarding the methodology in general and the second some practical ethical challenges (RQ3 and study 3) and this section is arranged accordingly.

Informed by my involvement in case 1 as a research assistant, I first positioned this thesis as an ethnography. The research design for case 2 was shaped by the design of case 1. After discussing this with the participants, Dr Fredrik Rusk joined as analytic support during the final stretch of the data collection. The design was highly focused on gaining researcher immersion (Hammersley, 2018) of the online gaming arena and the design reflected that and can be considered successful in that regard (see e.g. study 2 and Rusk & Ståhl, 2020). However, the research design with only interviews as insight into the offline community provided us as researchers

with a partial understanding of what being a student at an esports programme entailed from a student perspective. Therefore, this study is an ethno-case study (Parker-Jenkins, 2018). The ethno-case study framework advocates that an insider's perspective of a phenomena can be gained without the extensive fieldwork that is associated with ethnography.

In this case, research access to the field was also limited by my age and gender. This 'otherness' can limit researcher immersion into the phenomenon, as was the case in TL Taylor's (2015) work on esports and therefore that study was, unlike her previous work, not reported as ethnography. Like TL Taylor, I experienced a level of 'otherness' during the data collection, especially in case 2 where I differed both in age and gender from the teenage men that dominate the demographic profile of the esports program. Additionally, the research design was influenced by the fact that simply spectating is not an option in CS:GO and participation in the game activity is required to take part in a particular match. It is noteworthy that my 'otherness' decreased as the participants noted that I shared a contextual vocabulary, of games and social media respectively, with them. While cultural understanding does not automatically equate to participantship, me and the respective participants had a common language which helped facilitate the discussions on the platforms. Through video and/or screen recordings, I as a researcher can gain access to contexts that are deemed private but of relevance to the educational field of research. Here, by giving the students agency in the data collection, me and my colleagues were provided with a participant's perspective of the online platforms. Unlike live streams, which are centered around a performative aspect as the player intentionally showcases their gameplay for and with an audience, these screen recordings documented a more private every day in-game experience. While focusing on the participants screens, a fairly private sphere (Paakkari, 2020), the level of participant agency in both cases might have lessened the research designs potential intrusiveness. Further, the screen recordings offer data of the participant's activities as they happen in situ (Blikstad-Balas, 2017; Russell & Barley, 2020), and the value of that perspective was also emphasized to the participants. For example, in case 2 the facilitated analysis of and discussion on player jargon is based on in-game interaction, not solely on interviews outside of the game context. In addition, the video stimulated recall interviews (Nguyen et al, 2013; Pitkänen, 2015), allowed me and my colleagues to anchor or revise our understanding of the material with the participants and their experiences.

While a recording is always a selection in terms of time, here, the screen recording differs from a photo or video recording which are always framed by the researchers understanding of what is relevant at the time (Barthes, 1981). A full screen recording shows all that is happening on the screen at the time and is not limited by my understanding of the context at the time

of data collection. When, like in case 1, a researcher brings a camera to a classroom, the researcher's presence and focus becomes apparent as everyone can see who the camera is (and is not) aimed at. In comparison, the researchers could be considered invisible in a screen recording as they are not physically present in that particular space. However, Pink et al (2016) as well as myself claim that this is not the case. For example, in case 2, the participants quite often reminded each other to start their respective recordings. Additionally, there are in both cases visual reminders of the ongoing data collection. In case 1, the logo of the mirroring software is present whenever active and in case 2, a red marker signals an active screen recording. Likewise, Shaw (2014) mentioned that her being physically present in the same room during game interviews; interviews where the participant is playing a game simultaneously as they are being interviewed, affected the participants in-game experience.

The participants in both cases became more comfortable with the technical setup as well as the research design as time went on. For example, at one point in case 1, another student decided to tease the participant by sending an inappropriate picture to her so that it would be visible on her screen and thereby in the screen recording. However, the participant (and myself) makes a note of his intention and the participant calmly turned off the screen sharing, told him to stop and then resumed the screen sharing. Further, it appears that taking part of the data through video stimulated recall helped the participants see how me and my colleagues approached the material. In case 2 and their final recorded match, one participant is blowing on his external microphone and then remembers how loud noises sound when I show the participants a recording. He then comments that his actions will ”blow up the speakers on Matilda's computer”, giggles and does it one more time. Accordingly, by this point of the data collection, his actions suggest that he does not find the research to be intrusive but that it might even be a venue for somewhat playful behaviour.

Screen recordings is a fairly new form of data collection and thereby, how they are employed as a method varies depending on the researcher and their context. Here, the screen recordings as data also offered opportunities for discussing the research design as a whole. In their first recorded match, the participants from one team in case 2 discuss whether or not to record another match instead of sharing the current one. One participant would prefer to share a match where ”they actually play well” as they are ultimately losing that particular game. Discussions like this, and the one where they discussed if they could swear or not during a recording were highly relevant for the data collection at large. Such discussions provided me with insight into what parts of the research design in case 2 needed clarification. Here, I could clarify that there was no need to censor their language use for me if they usually swear when playing together and if they were comfortable doing so while recording. Additionally, I specified

that both wins as well as losses are valuable for me when trying to understand the in-game context and that their individual performances were not my analytical focus.

In both cases, the participants have generously shared recordings from private spheres that at times portrays them in a less flattering light. Here, the participants do not only offer their thoughts on loaded topics such as gender norms, but also share their own screen so that we can see how such norms are maintained, in situ, online. As my understanding of these online platforms have evolved, I have had the opportunity to revisit the data in a way that would not have been possible with solely field notes. By research endeavours such as this, online norms on gender, identity, ethnicity and sexuality can be better understood and ultimately questioned. With their connection to offline educational contexts, the norms that are active on these platforms have an impact on students and their lives. Based on the results discussed here, we see that who is possible online is highly connected to identity categories offline and accordingly, these findings are of high relevance in educational research. I hope that the results presented here can function as a starting point for discussions on online norms, and potentially taking a stance against these norms, together with students.

Another highly relevant methodological perspective in this thesis is research ethics. Both cases follow criteria for ethically sound research: the participants, being over the age of 15 at the time, gave their informed consent and the research could not potentially risk or harm them. While the participants were aware that they could withdraw at any time, the opposite situation occurred when a team member wanted to share his own date and thereby became a participant later on. Accordingly, it is reasonable to presume that the research project was seen as non-intrusive. However, the relevant ethical guidelines (e.g. TENK, 2019 on a national level) did not always cover the issues we faced. As discussed in study 3, three practical ethical issues occurred throughout the data collection, analysis and reporting the findings for study 2.

The first issue was gaining *informed consent* from the players that participant engaged with as they were randomly assigned as co-players and opponents. As previously discussed, we decided to differentiate between active and passive participants (see e.g. Quinton & Reynolds, 2018). The students at the esports program was considered active participants as they volunteered to be part of the research. They informed both offline and online associations of what interacting with them while doing screen recordings might entail. We discussed informing all players before a match by posting a short description of the project in the pre-game lobby as well as who to contact if anyone wanted to know more. However, the participants were reluctant towards such a practice as they though it would result in negative in-game treatment for them. Ultimately, to avoid potentially positioning the participants in a situation where they could be

treated negatively, potentially causing them harm in-game due to them being part of the research project, their safety was prioritized. In terms of the passive participants, their in-game actions were not the focus of analysis and the only potentially identifiable information available (gamer tags and to some extent player icons) have been anonymized and their privacy is thereby solidified.

The second ethical challenge entailed maintaining the participants *online privacy* in relation to their gamertags (in-game usernames). As in-game self-representations (Sveningsson, 2003; Zhou et al, 2021), gamer tags as well as player icons are potential tools for in-game identity (co)construction. While the participants might not (yet) consider themselves professional enough for their respective gamertags to be their trademark, gamertags clearly functions as one customizable tool for identity (co)construction online. However, they were not analysed as part of study 2 nor in these summary chapters of the thesis. As esports students, the participants had online presence where their gamertags were connected to their 'real names' as well as photographs taken of them during esports events. Due to questions of research transparency and intellectual property, there are those advocating that public information online should be reported as such (see e.g. Paakkari & Rautio, 2019; Sugiuira et al, 2017). However, others like Beneito- Montagu (2011) argue that not all that is publicly available online is public information and that should be considered when research is reported. Correspondingly, due to the connection to the participants offline lives, reporting their unaltered gamertags was not an option in order to maintain participant anonymity. As we could not find a solution for analysing the gamertags that was both transparent and credible (see the discussion in the summary for study 3 in 6.3), we could not include the gamertags in the analysis for paper 2.

The third practical ethical issue was on *portraying participants as accurately as possible* despite various stakeholder interests. It can be argued that the sole justification for collecting data is that the research findings will be shared through publication (Swedish research council, 2017). Research on new digital phenomena tends to gain public interest (Quinton & Reynolds, 2018), which puts further emphasis on representing the studied phenomenon and context as fairly as possible, for everyone involved. There is, in other words, a need to avoid normative approaches (Bennerstedt el al, 2012; Bennerstedt, 2013) despite different stakeholders' interest in generating certain results. In the case of study 2, there were stakeholders with conflicting interests for portraying the context in a specific light and putting emphasis on certain aspects of the data. Despite competing power differentials, we wanted to convey the complexity of the data as accurately as possible, without taking sides and while considering the participants' vulnerability. Further, as video gaming as a hobby is continuously stigmatized (see e.g. van Rooij, 2018; Zhao & Zhu,

2020), a research project focusing on the participants' interests in video games legitimized their hobby. As discussed in study 2, technomasculinity (Johnson, 2018) is the norm within online gaming, which can explain why players of online games feel justified expressing certain language and maintaining a power structure where they are on the top. As this is true for the online game community as a whole, stressing this behaviour solely among the participants would be unjust, irresponsible and unproductive for the larger discussion on the issue. By vilifying the participants, we would not have fairly represented the phenomena we studied (Quinton & Reynolds, 2018). By discussing the findings in relation to current research on online games, we can illuminate the larger structures at work. By doing so, we can question that offensive language as 'gamer lingo' (Pulos, 2013) is taken for granted in online games and highlight the segregation that technomasculinity enables, while also showing that there are voices, in the gaming community, that question this language use.

Conducting research on online platforms is still fairly uncharted territory, which is visible in contemporary studies with highly experimental research designs (see e.g. Monge and O´Brien, 2021 where the researchers intentionally created a toxic in-game experience for unknowing players). As researchers explore different methods to research online platforms, they might, like in this case, end up in situations that was not covered by current ethical guidelines. Neither in study 3 nor here do I raise these questions in order to offer any sort of best practice. Rather, by describing the reasoning for our approaches, I hope to bring attention to these issues for future online research endeavours. As the design was in line with the ethical guidelines by TENK, we found an optional external ethical review to be redundant. In hindsight, the optional ethical review of the project might have identified some of the issues presented here. On the other hand, neither the previous guidelines (2009) nor the current ones (2019) for human sciences cover online research specifically. Me and my colleagues have identified several ethical issues while maintaining participant integrity, and are therefore more informed of such issues going forward. However, these issues are not solely relevant for us and other researches, but also for those institutions that maintain and update ethical guidelines, both nationally and internationally. With varying contexts, platforms and participants, a fixed set of rules for conducting research online might be counterproductive but I do recognize the need for further discussion on the topic of ethically sound research. Echoing Pink (2013), a research project like this, a case-based and process-focused ethical framework can be considered optimal. Consent is then seen as an on-going process and part of an iterative-inductive approach that emphasizes the importance of addressing and resolving ethical aspects that arise in situ (Russell & Barley, 2020) and in each stage of the process (Markham & Buchanan, 2012; Quinton & Reynolds, 2018). Here, consent was re-negotiated throughout

the process and the research design was both discussed with the participants and then adapted in relation to their wishes. Going forward, I argue that in online research, a laboriously developed ethically-informed stance towards data generation will thus be necessary, as will continuous dialogue between researchers and participants—on the focus and purpose of the data collection.

7.5 Herstory, going forward

Fast forward ten years from the bachelor's student that 'came out' as a gamer. Since then, I have, in different forms, had the privilege to ponder questions of how we construct identities, alone and together, online and offline. This experience has been tumultuous and kept me on my toes. I have constantly had to revise the words I use to better reflect the identity categories I wish to discuss. To ponder the difference between ethnicity, nationality and race. To keep up to date with the latest acronym that includes all those who feel othered by a heteronormative cis-gendered ideal. These questions are continuously discussed and debated. From the day I that write this to the day you are reading it, I am sure something is at least slightly outdated. And that thought makes me happy. Because it means that the debate is ongoing, and hopefully, it means that we are taking a step towards a more inclusive, more equal society. Apart from a shifting society, I myself have also been under scrutiny. Not only through the fires of peer review, but through facing my own biases and privileges. After all this, at a recent event on esports in Finland, my knee-jerk reaction was to compare myself to the only other female participant in an otherwise male ensemble. Instead of focusing on which of us were the more legitimate 'expert' in terms of looks and competence, I consciously tried to shift my focus to other aspects. Such as what the male to female ratio says about esports in Finland. Or the fact that we were all white for that matter.

When I wrote the first draft for a research plan, I had no clue that I would come back to questions of legitimacy time and time again. Who is and who is not a legitimate part of the community and how this affects the identities one can aspire to. In the final stretch of this process, I realized that I too am one of those gatekeepers, a limiter of identities. When asked about what games I prefer to play, I say that I play RPGs. If the person enquiries a bit more, I continue with saying that I have also dabbled a bit with both FPSs and MOBAs. What I do not say when someone asks me is that I occasionally play mobile games, both of the 'build and harvest' type as well as time management games. My reason for not mentioning these is partially based on the fact that I play these games to a lesser extent. But in all honesty, it has more to do with that these games do not count. In my desire to construct a 'real gamer identity' despite being a woman (which gives me a clear disadvantage in that effort), I have felt the need to distance myself from

such playing habits. Therefore, going forward, if someone asks me what games I enjoyed during the pandemic, I will henceforth answer truthfully. I did another playthrough as Jane Shephard saving the people of Earth from invading aliens. I spent some time helping settlers and shooting mirelurks in the Commonwealth. Despite my best efforts, I could not help my fellow refugees from starving during the siege of Pogoren. And I enjoyed harvesting my crops and watch the seasons shift on my farm in Stardew Valley.

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Matilda Ståhl

Community, Diversity and Visuality –

an ethno-case study on constructing identities and becoming legitimate participants in online/offline communities

Since the launch of the first web browser, the early-nineties was dominated by a view of the Internet as a utopian space for identity play and community building. However, current online platforms are not spaces where people can be a anyone or anything they want. This participant-focused thesis discusses how current online platforms continue to be shaped by the identity categories we inhabit in offline contexts.

The aim of the thesis is twofold and is answered through insight into two different but convergent cases. Both cases are connected to the Finnish educational system; the first in the theoretical upper secondary school and the second in the more practically oriented vocational school. First, the aim is to explore what frames identity construction online and how the youth participants (co)construct identities on online platforms. These cases provided access to the social media and multiplayer game platforms the youth participants engaged with through their own screens. The results show that the participants identity (co)construction online was framed by the platform's technical affordances, the online and offline communities they were part of as well as visuality, community and diversity. Further, the aim was also to discuss methodological implications for employing screen recordings in an ethno-case study within educational research. The practical ethical challenges that occurred revolved around maintaining participant integrity; gaining informed consent from players that became co-observed, defining privacy online and portraying participants accurately despite stakeholder interests. In a way seldom documented in contemporary research, this thesis offers a rare insight into youth in their online/offline communities through the two hybridized cases. The results, highlighting the connection between online/offline communities, have implications not only for these particular schools, but for educational research as well. Further, this thesis is an important contribution in the methodological discussion on conducting online research from a participant's perspective.

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